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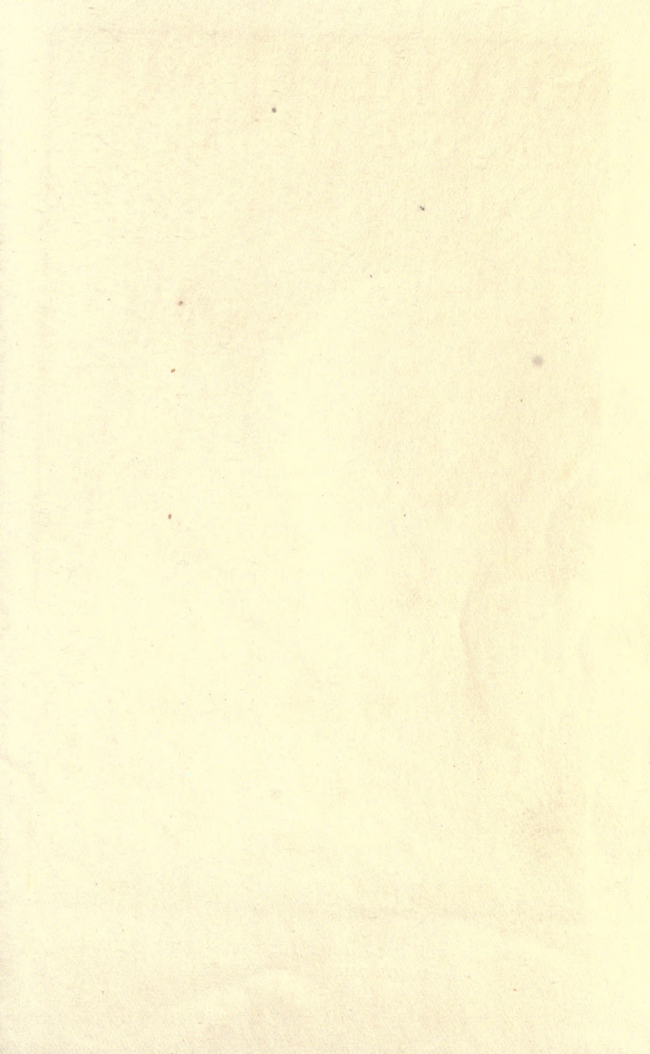


RUMOURS IN THE FOURTH FORM

EVERY GIRL'S BOOKSHELF

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-

OF ALL BOOKSHOPS





FOR A BLISSFUL HALF-HOUR THE GIRLS WANDERED IN AND OUT OF THE VARIOUS PASSAGES.

RUMOURS IN THE FOURTH FORM

BY
DOROTHY DENNISON

ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR TWIDLE

LONDON
THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY
4 BOUVERIE STREET, E.C. 4

TO
MOTHER

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

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RUMOURS IN THE FOURTH FORM

CHAPTER I

RUMOURS

“IT’S the most disgraceful thing that’s ever happened, and I think the whole school ought to protest.”

“But, my dear Natalia, it hasn’t happened yet, so how can we?”

“Besides,” and May Bryant’s usually merry countenance was puckered by a frown, “we should all get into an awful row for discussing something which you overheard Miss Loughton speaking about quite privately. You shouldn’t have listened. It wasn’t honourable.”

Natalia Foreman fidgeted rather uneasily and turned pink. Then she said:

“I couldn’t help overhearing, so I’m no more dishonourable than you. I had to go to Miss Loughton’s study to give in my health certificate, and after I had knocked I stood waiting for the ‘Come in,’ but I don’t think she heard me.

Miss Loughton and Miss Warren were standing near the door, and I heard the Head talking about this new girl."

"What *exactly* did she say?" asked Rita Brown, a tall girl of fourteen. "Can you remember her actual words?"

"She said, 'I do hope the sad story about Mr. Aston will never come out, otherwise I am afraid that there are some girls who would give his daughter the cold shoulder because of it. I shall put her in the Lower Fourth and ask the staff never to mention the story, either in or outside of school. After all, it happened eight years ago now, and is practically forgotten.'"

Natalia paused for breath, and then looked round triumphantly, yet rather hesitatingly, at the circle of girls. She was proud to be the bearer of an unusually exciting piece of news, but some of the Fourth Form had been rather damping in their reception of it.

"I expect her father was a criminal, or something awful like that," continued Natalia, finding that her speech was received quite silently.

Peggy Seaton, who up till now had not spoken, sat up at this last remark.

"Well, if he was, his daughter ought to be sent to a reformatory or—or—Siberia or somewhere like that, oughtn't she?"

"Timber, tar and turpentine," chanted Gwen

Forrester, as she danced into the form-room in time to hear this last remark. "Who was speaking of that ice-bound land of Siberia, the products of which are?—come along, girls, quickly please! The geography of this form is disgraceful. Can *no* girl tell me the products of Siberia?"

The girls giggled at Gwen's exact imitation of Miss Warren's oft-repeated words. Geography was not a strong point with the Fourth Form at the Rothermere High School, and "that ice-bound land of Siberia" had, during the past term, caused them much tribulation.

"We were just talking about a new girl who is coming into our form this term," said Beatrice Danvers, when Gwen had seated herself on one of the desks.

"Well, what about her? Does she come from Siberia, did I hear you say? How exciting! She'll be able to tell me all I want to know about the Trans-Siberian Railway. I expect she has travelled on it to get here. I shall make love to her the nights we have geography homework. Is she a Russian?"

"If you'd only give someone else a chance to speak we'd be able to tell you," laughed May Bryant, who on account of her name and her hair was known throughout the school as "Matches."

“As inflammable as ever,” murmured Gwen, unabashed. “You really must control your impulsive speech, and dye your hair some other colour than red with a dash of flame, Matches, my love.”

“Gwen,” said Natalia, who during this time had seemed lost in thought, and had not joined in the hilarity which always accompanied Gwen wherever she went, “it’s really serious about this new girl. Her father’s a thief or something awful, and we don’t want her in our form.”

“What do you mean? Is he still in Siberia, then?”

“Good gracious, no! Not that I know of. It’s his daughter who is coming here, you know.”

“Yes, but why shouldn’t she go to school in Siberia? Is she coming over to learn the language?”

“Oh, do be sensible, Gwen,” said Natalia, who was beginning to get cross, as she saw the rest of the form preparing to be amused. “You’ve got Siberia on the brain.”

“No, merely in the heart, because of my love for Miss Warren,” corrected that young lady, whose dislike for the geography mistress (a dislike which, by the way, was warmly returned) was well known in the school. “But what I want to know is, why this Russian, whose

father is, or was, in penal servitude in Siberia, is coming over here to school ? ”

Natalia, now thoroughly roused, tapped the floor angrily with her foot. May burst into a peal of laughter.

“ You silly,” she said to her friend. “ The girl’s not a Russian or anything else foreign as far as we know. At any rate, she’s got an English name. But Natalia overheard Miss Loughton telling Miss Warren that there was some mystery or something about this new girl’s father. He did something he shouldn’t have done.”

“ H’m—I have known others in the same plight,” murmured Gwen. “ But why did Peggy say she came from Siberia ? ”

“ I didn’t, stupid.” Peggy almost shouted in her exasperation. “ I said she ought to go there, if her father’s a thief, instead of coming to the High School.”

“ O—o—oh, I see ! ”

Light dawned upon Gwen’s face, but in an instant it was replaced by a quick frown. She turned to Natalia.

“ Did you say you listened to this conversation ? ”

“ No,” said Natalia uncomfortably, “ I overheard it—I couldn’t help it.”

“ Did you know it was meant to be private ? ”

“ No ! Yes ! Well, that is, I wasn't sure.”

“ Yes, you were,” broke in May hotly. “ You told me yourself that Miss Loughton was asking the staff not to say anything about it, either inside or outside of school. And yet you came straight off and told all of us. I *knew* it was dishonourable directly you told us. I felt it in my bones. Gwen thinks so, too.”

“ I *do*,” said her friend emphatically. “ Most likely you've imagined most of it, but even if you haven't, it was a mean trick to set the whole form against a girl before she arrives, just because her father has done something wrong. She couldn't help that. I vote we all give her a rousing welcome to make up for it. Who says ‘ Yes ? ’ ”

Ordinarily the whole form would have followed its leader and favourite without a murmur, but this time very few hands went up in answer to the appeal.

“ Look here, Gwen, it's all very well for you to talk like that, and I expect you're right about Natalia having listened, but at the same time it *is* the limit having a girl with a shady character plumped into the form.” Rita Brown spoke very quietly, but with determination.

“ You donkey ! ” replied Gwen, with characteristic fervour, “ the girl hasn't got a shady character, it's her father. You can't help your

father being your father any more than he can help you being his daughter."

"Thank you," answered Rita. "Well, to change the conversation, did you overhear her Christian name, Natalia?"

"No! I didn't." Natalia had relapsed into a sullen silence and would not be drawn out further. Her conscience was pricking her, for she knew that she had really strained every nerve to listen, and she did not enjoy Gwen's caustic comments on her action.

"We shall quite possibly know ourselves on Monday," said May. "Several new girls are coming a couple of days late. Miss Loughton said so at Assembly this morning, you know."

"I expect she got held up by a snow-drift on the Trans-Siberian Railway," chuckled Peggy Seaton.

"Yes, and she's bound to be a Bolshevist. If she knows that you've tried to harm her, Natalia, she'll either send you poisoned chocolates or else put a timed bomb under your desk. Anyway, your life's not worth much now," was Gwen's parting shot as, arm-in-arm with her friend May, she left the room and made her way down to the playing fields.

For the rest of that Friday afternoon there was very little work done in the Fourth Form. Not that there was ever much work during the first

two days of term, but the excitement of Natalia's news distracted the girls' attention, and every one, most of all the French mistress, felt distinctly relieved when the four o'clock bell gave the signal of release.

"I shall be frightfully interested to see this new girl," said Gwen, as she walked home with May that afternoon. "But we shall have our work cut out to see that she has fair play, old girl."

"We'll do it though," and May gave her attaché-case a mighty swing to lend emphasis to her words. With a click the lock gave way, and a few seconds later all the contents lay scattered on the muddy pavement.

"Oh, bother—there's my new algebra in a puddle. Won't Miss Martin be mad with me; and my rubber is bowling away into the sea as hard as it can," moaned May, as the two girls began rescuing pencils, books and other articles.

She stooped to pick up a box of drawing pins, and as she did so a gust of wind from the sea swept round the corner, and lifting her school hat clean off her head, sent it spinning merrily down the road.

Dropping everything, she gave chase. It was a new hat, only bought the previous day, and in spite of her mother's warnings, she had refused to have elastic on it, for elastic was, she said,

“so babyish.” May did not care to think what her mother would say if the hat were not rescued before it was entirely ruined.

On she tore, but the hat went faster, and May was inclined to be fat. By this time it had gained about a hundred yards on her, and would soon be out of sight. But just as she was giving up in despair, a lady, accompanied by a girl of about May’s own age, turned a corner and walked towards her.

“Oh, if only they’ll have the sense to catch it for me,” panted May. “Yes! the girl’s got it. Oh, thank goodness!”

She stopped, breathless, and tried in vain to tidy her mop of hair whilst the two approached.

“Thank you *ever* so,” she said gratefully, taking the hat from the girl’s hand. “I should have got into a row had I lost this. It’s my new school hat.”

Then, beaming complacently on them both, she made her way more leisurely back to Gwen.

No sooner was she out of ear-shot than the rescuer of the hat, a plain girl of fourteen, looked eagerly up at her mother.

“I wonder if I’ll be in her form. I do like the look of her, don’t you?”

“Yes, Rosemary, she seems a merry kind of girl, and has a nice face. You are sure to be happy there, dear. In fact,” she added jokingly,

“ you will soon be so in love with it all that you will hardly want to come home to your mother in the evenings.”

The girl looked up seriously, and there was an almost passionate note in her voice as she said :

“ *Never*—Mother mine ! ”

CHAPTER II

THE NEW GIRL

"SHE'S come. I saw her being shown into the study to wait for Miss Loughton."

"Who?" Dorothy Carson, the "genius" of the form, looked up dreamily from her geography book, as Gwen burst into the room just before the first lesson on Monday morning.

"Why, the new girl, of course—the Russian—the daughter of Natalia's villain—the girl we're really all dying to see. I never remember such excitement over a new girl before."

"Oh—what is she like?" came in a chorus from the fifteen girls assembled in the class.

"Tall, and rather thin. But I only saw her back view, so there's still the thrill of seeing her face."

"I expect she'll be handsome, with flashing eyes," announced Rita. "Villains and their relations always are."

"And she *must* be dark," Peggy Seaton added; "it wouldn't be proper if she had anything but raven locks."

At this point Miss Warren's entry put a stop

to all further conversation, and the girls did their best to fix their attention upon the detested Siberian desert. Strangely enough it was Dorothy Carson, whose work was generally the joy of the whole staff, who made the first really bad *faux pas*.

"Will you tell me, Dorothy, what the central part of this plain produces?" asked the mistress, sweeping her pointer over a portion of the Siberian map.

"Villains," murmured Dorothy thoughtfully, with a far away look in her eyes.

"Er—I beg your pardon, I did not quite catch that answer," said Miss Warren, who, mercifully, was a little hard of hearing.

"Wake up, booby," hissed Gwen, digging a ruler surreptitiously into Dorothy's back. "The three T's."

"Ah yes, timber, tar and turpentine," chanted Dorothy, now thoroughly aroused.

"Correct," beamed Miss Warren. "Now I should like Gwen Forrester to tell me . . ."

But what it was that Miss Warren would have liked Gwen to tell her for ever remained a secret, for at that moment the form-room door opened and the head mistress entered, followed by the new girl.

A feeling of intense disappointment swept over the curious girls as their eyes fell upon this

much-discussed schoolmate. All their dreams of a dark-haired, black-eyed beauty faded away before the uninteresting plain-featured girl who stood before them. She was, as Gwen had said, tall and thin, her hair was a nondescript brown, and her face sallow. The girls had yet to discover that she had beautiful eyes, which changed from blue to hazel and hazel to green, and which, when she was angry, could flash fire.

“Good morning, girls,” said Miss Loughton, when the form had sat down. “I want to introduce to you your new companion, Rosemary Aston.”

Did the head mistress’s voice hesitate ever so slightly as she pronounced the name? If so, she recovered herself in a moment and continued:

“I hope you will all make it your business to help Rosemary to feel at home here. She has never been to a large public school before, so it will be a new experience for her. But I know that I can rely upon the Fourth Form to make a new girl welcome. That is your seat, Rosemary,” she said, pointing to an empty desk next to Natalia.

“Thank you, Miss Loughton,” said the girl, and walked to the seat indicated and sat down.

The rest of the lesson passed uneventfully,

but no sooner had Miss Warren got outside the door than May Bryant suddenly leapt from her seat and ran over to Rosemary's desk.

"Why," she cried, "if you aren't the dear angel who saved my hat for me yesterday."

The rest of the form looked on astonished at this remarkable familiarity. Only Natalia Foreman sniffed.

"Mother would never have forgiven me had I ruined that hat," May went on. "This was the girl who saved it for me, you see," she announced, having already told the form the story of her mishap the previous night.

"Well, then, let me offer you the right hand of friendship, as they say in books," and Gwen thrust out an inky hand in the direction of the new-comer. "Love me, love my Matches. If she likes you, then I'm pretty sure to, for we're a sort of David and Jonathan."

Rosemary took the proffered hand rather shyly, then turning to May, she said:

"I'm ever so glad I'm in your form. Mother said last night she thought I might be."

"On the whole, with a few exceptions, it's a jolly ripping form," said May. "There are seventeen of us now that you've come. We're frightfully good at gym. and games, and very bad at geography. The rest of our work is fair

to middling. The College students hate us like poison and avoid us like the plague, but then you really can't blame them, for we do lead them a life on Thursday afternoon."

"Who are the College students?" Rosemary asked.

"Oh, didn't you know? There's a Froebel College attached to the school—about fifty students. They've all matriculated and left school, and some of them have been to a University, too. They come here to learn how to teach, and every Thursday afternoon they practise on us."

"Yes," broke in Gwen, "the whole school is handed over to them. Our own staff all go home that afternoon, and, gee whizz! Don't we have some gay times!" Gwen executed a war dance on the spot at the remembrance of some notable and outstanding Thursday afternoon pranks.

"The newer the students are, the better," chimed in Peggy. "Generally speaking, they only stay for about two years, and as they take different forms each week, they don't have time to get to know us properly."

"Yes, and you have to be frightfully naughty to get reported to Miss Loughton—almost impossibly wicked. It's only once in a blue moon that anybody does."

Peggy's eyes glowed at the thought of so much unpunished mischief, as she continued :

"If you get caught, which isn't often, for they're as blind as bats on the whole, you get reported to the student who is acting as head mistress for the afternoon. But that doesn't matter, for she's only one of themselves."

"There's only one really good girl in the form, and that's the Genius," Natalia said, thumping Dorothy heartily on the back. "She's good at everything except gym. and net-ball. One of the sights of the week is to see the Genius trying to climb a rope. She looks like an anæmic jelly-fish."

The Genius blinked amiably and turned to Rosemary.

"Are you good at games?" she asked.

"I love them," was the answer, "but I've never learnt properly, you know."

"You ought to make a good shoot or defence in net ball—you're so tall," said Gwen. "We're fearfully keen on net-ball in this form. This is the most exciting term of the year to us, because it's the annual Ringwood match. Our rival school is Ringwood High, you know. They are about ten miles from here, and we meet them once a year at net-ball. We've beaten them badly lately, so we're mad to win again this year. We of the fourth all stand

together and cheer until we're hoarse. Last year our form mistress said that the day after the Ringwood match was the most peaceful in the year for her, as we all had such sore throats we just couldn't talk."

"Are any of you in the team?" asked the new girl.

"Not yet," answered Beatrice, "but Natalia expects to get in next year, and several of us are in the Second, so ought to get our first team colours before we leave."

"By the way, I suppose we ought to introduce ourselves all round," said Gwen. "Matches and I hang together, and Natalia and Rita and that little crowd round there are rather thick, and Peggy and Beatrice come with us." Then after running through the names of the rest of the form she added:

"And the Genius stands alone in her glory, but is friends with all of us. She's a kind of form mascot. Why did you of all people ask Rosemary if she was good at games?" she enquired, turning to Dorothy.

"I thought perhaps we could be special friends," was the answer. "Not that I don't like all of you, you know, but you are so silly about games."

Then she walked slowly out of the room amidst a howl of laughter from her schoolmates.

“ Dear old Genius,” cried May Bryant, wiping the tears of merriment from her eyes. “ We all love her, and our only fear is that her cleverness will soon remove her into the Upper Fourth. She does lend such an air of respectability to our form.”

“ Which we shall need more than ever now,” added Natalia, with a glance at Rita, which the new girl caught, but did not understand.

CHAPTER III

“MOTHER MINE”

IN a shabby room, at the top of a shabby house, Mrs. Aston sat sewing, one April afternoon a week after Rosemary had first gone to Rothermere High School.

She was making the most of the rapidly waning light, as her needle flashed in and out of the delicate material on which she was working. Mrs. Aston was very used to this work. She did it from morning till night in order to earn a living for herself and her girl.

Everything in the room showed signs of wear, but at the same time bore the stamp of refinement, from the old oak chest which stood against the wall by the fire-place, to the spotless, much-darned cloth which covered the table in the centre of the room. The table was laid for two, and a kettle was just beginning to sing on the hob.

But for the girl who at that moment was leaving the famous old High School, the whole atmosphere and “hominess” of the room was centred in the slight, delicate woman who sat

by the window working and listening for her child's footsteps.

Mrs. Aston was a beautiful woman. Trouble and anxiety had carved deep lines in the face which had once been smooth and care-free, but they had added, rather than detracted from the beauty of it. For in the grey eyes, which looked out so bravely on life, there was a sweetness and peace which had not been there before sorrow touched and beautified them.

Once when Rosemary had been reading Browning's "In Memoriam," she had stopped when she came to the last verse, and had quoted it softly :

"One who never turned his back, but marched breast
forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed though Right were worsted, Wrong would
triumph,
Held we fall to rise—are baffled to fight better, sleep to
wake."

"That's like you, Mother mine," she had added, looking up into her mother's face. For Rosemary adored her mother.

As Mrs. Aston sat there on that April afternoon, her thoughts were busy with the past. Some of them were very sad thoughts, and far-away ones, for they carried her beyond the seas.

It was the anniversary of her wedding day,

and the figure of the husband who was never far away from her thoughts was vividly before her. She never could have forgotten him had she wanted, for Rosemary was his living image. Once the girl, looking wistfully up at her mother, had said :

“Mother—I *wish* I were beautiful like you. Nobody thinks I’m your daughter, for I’m so plain and uninteresting. I haven’t even got pretty hair like you,” touching the soft brown curls that were only just beginning to go grey then.

Rosemary had never forgotten her mother’s answer, for taking the child’s face between her hands and looking earnestly at her, she had said :

“My child—you are more than beautiful to me, for you look at me every day with your father’s eyes. You are all that I have left of him, dear. Rosemary—for remembrance.”

Since then Rosemary had never wanted to look different.

It was when Mrs. Aston had been married for eight happy years, and Rosemary was a merry little girl of six, that the blow came which shattered Paul Aston’s home and pride, and eventually cost him his life.

Shortly after his marriage he had gone abroad and settled in Lucerne, where in partner-

ship with another Englishman named Levermore, whom Mrs. Aston had neither liked nor trusted, he carried on a successful business and lived a life of unclouded happiness with his wife and child.

It was not long before they came to love the quaint old town, with its wooden bridges spanning the arm of the lake, its beautiful squares and painted houses, and the cathedral, near which they lived in a delightful chalet. Rosemary's earliest remembrance was that of being taken on summer evenings to sit by the cold blue waters of the lake, and in her dreams she could still hear the low "*wunderschön, wunderschön*" of her nurse as she gazed across at the rose-flushed snow peaks of the Oberland, where they seemed to rise from the water in the far distance. There was always something delicate and ethereal about them to Rosemary. She used to wonder if those peaks would scrunch up in her hands if she pressed them, like the pink sugar spirals that she bought at the shop in the *Weinmarkt*.

Then one day Paul Aston came home with a cloud on his usually bright face. He ate his dinner almost in silence, but his wife waited, knowing that soon he would tell her all. She expected that after the meal he would throw himself into his favourite arm-chair, so that she might sit

on the arm and run her hands through his hair, as he loved her to do. Instead, he folded up his table napkin with hands that shook slightly, and said :

"I am going out for a bit, darling. Don't expect me till about ten o'clock. There are some business matters I've got to talk over with Lehman. It's quite a nice night. We may go on the lake."

It was not an unusual occurrence for him to go out with Herr Lehman, who held a responsible position in the business, and was also a personal friend. His wife was dead, and his only child lived with relatives away in one of the beautiful mountain villages, so Paul Aston's house was to him a second home, and often in the evenings he would come round and delight them with his music, for he was a wonderful violinist. So Mrs. Aston was not particularly surprised when her husband announced his intention of going out with his friend.

The evening wore on. Rosemary had been in for her "good night," and Mrs. Aston stood at the window of the dining-room, looking out over the black waters, on the surface of which the reflected lights danced and broke. The clouds had come up and obscured the moon. It was growing chill.

She left the window, but hardly had she

reached the centre of the room when a rumble of distant thunder broke away over the mountains. She came back to the window anxiously. These sudden storms were familiar, and usually they hardly heeded them, but to-night her husband was probably out on the lake in a gondola.

Already the waves were washing angrily against the stone walls, and within five minutes the whole lake was lashed into fury. The thunder broke overhead and rain poured down in torrents. It was the worst storm of the season.

By ten o'clock the storm was over and the water quiet again, but eleven o'clock came, and twelve, and still Paul Aston had not returned. It was late the next day before his body was discovered, washed up on a lonely part of the shore on one of the arms of the lake. There was no sign of his companion and business friend.

The following day the papers were full of it, not because of his tragic death, but because of the failure of his business. It had crashed the day before his death, and the ruin of it involved not only his wife and child and partners, but a number of others who had bought shares in it. All the blame was put on to him. He was accused of shady transactions, which could not

be disproved as he was not there to disprove them.

The tongue of the world wagged, as it always does on such occasions, and though Paul Aston's widow cared too deeply to listen to it much at first, it came back to her afterwards. Lehman, the only man who could have cleared his friend's name, had never been heard of—he had evidently been drowned with her husband, but his body had not been recovered. Paul Aston's partner, Levermore, acquitted himself of all blame, wound up the affairs of the business and left the district. Mrs. Aston had never seen or heard of him since, though she had made one or two enquiries, for in her secret heart she suspected him of being at the bottom of the mischief.

A fortnight after her husband's death she and her little girl came back to England. When Rosemary left school Mrs. Aston intended to tell her all, but till then she felt it unnecessary to cloud her life with the story. And Rosemary, though guessing that there was some secret, loved her mother far too much to risk hurting her by referring to it.

It was a hard business to make ends meet now that Rosemary was going to the High School, although Miss Loughton, who was a personal friend of Mrs. Aston's, was taking

Rosemary at reduced fees. But her daughter's love fully repaid the mother for all the hard work and the many sacrifices she made in order that her child might be well educated. She regretted none of them.

As she sat thinking, she heard the front door of the house bang, and the next minute Rosemary burst into the room.

"Hullo, Mother mine," she cried, as she came over and kissed her. "It's much too dark now for you to be sewing. We even had to have the lights on towards the end of drawing, and Matches said the cloak-room was like the Black Hole of Calcutta."

Her mother smiled.

"Matches seems to be a lively young person," she said; "but now come along and let's have tea. Pull the curtains, dear, and I will make it."

"Mother," said Rosemary over tea, "I love most of the girls, and I'm frightfully happy at school, but there's one girl I simply can't bear, and for some reason or other I know she hates me. It's Natalia Foreman. She and her friend Rita are always talking in whispers and looking at me in such a silly way. To-day in break they held what they called a 'Secret Society' behind the greenhouse in the garden. They asked about nine or ten girls, but not me or Gwen or Peggy or any of our set."

“ ‘ Our set ’ sounds as if you are thoroughly at home already, Rosemary.”

“ Yes, I think I am. You see, Gwen and Co. have gone out of their way to be ripping to me, but I wish Natalia would be nicer. Still, she hasn’t got her mother or father living, so I mustn’t blame her overmuch.”

“ You will always find some girls with whom you cannot get on as well as you do with Gwen and Matches,” replied her mother. “ If you are careful to be nice to Natalia, she may turn out all right in the end.”

“ Well, I’ll do my best just for your sake, darling ; but if she goes on being so horrid it won’t be easy.”

Mrs. Aston looked across at her child wistfully.

“ I would rather that you did it for Christ’s sake, Rosemary,” she said. “ You would be more likely to succeed then.”

But the girl frowned ever so slightly, and shook her head as she said :

“ No, Mother mine, if I couldn’t do it for you I couldn’t do it for anyone in the whole world.”

CHAPTER IV

A JOKE AND A CLUE

THE Fourth Form resembled nothing so much as an uncontrolled menagerie one Wednesday afternoon towards half-term. The bell for afternoon school had rung two minutes ago, but Fräulein had not yet appeared. She was shut in the study with Miss Loughton, and was expected at any moment to inflict the Fourth with an hour's German conversation.

Now if there was one thing that the members of this particular form loathed more than geography, it was German and French conversation, for it left no loophole of escape. In an ordinary lesson it was possible to cover their ignorance on most points by asking a continual stream of more or less intelligent questions on points that they did know, but *Gespräch* revealed their ignorance in all its nakedness, for they were not allowed to utter a word of English from beginning to end.

They had several times congratulated themselves that almost half a term had gone past

without either a French or German variety of this lesson, when the blow fell.

—“Girls!” and Peggy Seaton’s voice was raised high in order to make herself heard above the din, “can anybody tell me the German for headache, for I’m going to have one this afternoon. It will be so bad after all this noise that I’ll have to go out and lie down during *Gespräch*.”

“No good,” groaned May. “Margery Royce tried it in the Lower Fifth. Fräulein only made the form learn the German for about a dozen different aches and pains, and then told Margery you could forget a headache if you had enough to do, so she made her describe a picture all on her own for about five minutes. Margery said that at the end she had a real headache.”

A howl of sympathy greeted this statement. Fräulein was guilty of nothing less than cruelty to animals.

“Schweigen Sie still, kindern. Schnell!”

A sudden silence fell on the noisy class as Fräulein’s peculiarly guttural voice was heard repeating the familiar phrase. Each girl slipped quickly into her desk.

Then they looked at each other in astonishment. Fräulein had certainly spoken, but she was not to be seen.

Suddenly one of the girls leapt from her

desk and made for the door, it was slightly ajar.

"You *wretch*," she cried, pulling in the laughing Gwen. "I knew it wouldn't be long before you were at your tricks again. What shall we do to her, girls?"

Immediately there was a hubbub. It was by no means the first time that Gwen, with her wonderful power of mimicry, had managed to take them in. Now she must pay for it.

"Turn her out," cried Rita. "Make her wait and meet Fräulein at the door."

This suggestion met with approval and was immediately acted upon. In a very short time Gwen, utterly breathless, found herself outside the door.

"Lassen mir komm in," she panted through the keyhole in excruciating German. "Ich will report you all zu Fräulein Loughton."

No response was forthcoming, however, for half a dozen girls had propped themselves against the door. It was hopeless to think of getting in until they chose to let her, or until Fräulein came and demanded to know why she was there.

Meanwhile, conversation was resumed within the form-room. Already Fräulein was ten minutes late—with great good fortune, and if it were something really important, the head

mistress might keep her yet another ten minutes. Fortune was smiling on them.

For two minutes there was quiet from the outside, Gwen having resigned herself to her fate, and having gone to the end of the corridor to talk to the school cat, who lay curled up near the radiator. Then the girls supporting the door felt the handle turn.

"Try again, deary," encouraged May from the inside. "There are only six of us to keep you out."

There was silence for a second or two, broken only by the chuckles of the girls, then the door handle was shaken furiously and a voice exclaimed :

"Schreckliches kind. Öffnen die Thur."

"Öffnen it yourself," cried Peggy delightedly.

A dead silence followed. Then :

"You are ver bad girls. I vill report you."

"*Do* be original. You've told us that once," was the reply. "At any rate, it's a case of the pot calling the kettle black, for you're worse than any of us."

"I am Fräulein. You are ver bad girls. Open se door."

"Read Bacon's essay on 'Truth,'" cried May. "It's dreadful to tell such fibs at your age. You're too young and innocent."

"I say, Peggy, I suppose you are quite sure

that is Gwen, because I'm not. I believe it's Fräulein," broke in Rosemary, with a rather anxious look on her face.

"No, that's Gwen all right. You can't possibly tell the real from the false when she starts imitating," was the reassuring reply.

But Rita Brown and one or two others suddenly looked alarmed, and their anxiety must have communicated itself to Peggy, for, bidding the others keep their places, she turned the handle and opened the door the tiniest crack.

What she saw made her fall back with a smothered exclamation of horror.

A few paces back from the door, her face pink with anger, stood Fräulein, and behind her, Gwen, with heaving shoulders, was pressing a handkerchief to her mouth in a vain endeavour to swallow her laughter.

In a silence, which but for her appearance would have been dignified, the irate little mistress made her way to the desk and stood there while the girls went back to their places. Then she spoke—in German, for her English vocabulary was limited.

For two minutes the form listened to the most eloquent outburst they had ever heard in the Teutonic language. The greater part of it was Greek to them, for Fräulein had only arrived the term before, and had so far only treated

them to a few simple sentences, and a great deal of grammar. The girls sat listening, almost entranced, as her words toppled over each other in their attempt to get out quickly.

When she ceased, only the loud ticking of the clock could be heard. The girls looked at each other helplessly. Whatever had she been saying, and how were they to make her understand before she reported them wholesale to Miss Loughton?

Then, to their amazement, Rosemary suddenly stood up in her place, and in German, almost as fluent as Fräulein's, began to speak to her. Whatever did it mean? Where had she learnt it?

Evidently Rosemary had followed every word of the mistress's harangue, and was answering it, for, as she went on, bit by bit Fräulein's face cleared, until she looked almost amiable again, and was there a shadow of amusement lurking round the corners of her mouth?

After another brief harangue in German, addressed this time to Rosemary only, the little German mistress turned to the rest of the class.

"I do understand quite," she said, with a smile, "but anoizzer time you do it no more. Nun sprechen wir im Deutsch."

The rest of the lesson progressed very much

as it always did, except that Fräulein appealed many times to Rosemary, who answered her in German with the utmost ease. When the bell went, there was no time for talking, for their form mistress was waiting outside.

No sooner, however, were they released for the day than the majority of the form fell upon Rosemary and demanded to know where and how she had learned to speak German, "for all the world like a Hun," as May elegantly put it.

Rosemary laughed.

"Well, I lived all the first part of my life in Lucerne, you see," she said, "and quite pure German is spoken there. My nurse used always to speak it. I think I must have learnt it first from her, and then the servants talked it. You can't help picking up a language if you hear it spoken every day of your life."

"But however have you managed to keep it from us all this time? Why, we've had crowds of German lessons since you've been here and you haven't seemed awfully good at it."

"We've only had grammar, you know," said Rosemary. "As a matter of fact, I'm behind you in the grammar, for I've never learnt any. I can tell by the sound if a verb is right in a sentence, but declinations finish me off. I can't tell one from the other."

"There, I *knew* it," moaned Peggy. "I've

always known learning verbs was no good, and just to think of the time I've wasted over them, not to mention the brain power and . . ."

"Oh, stop it, Peggy," cried Gwen. "Your brain power isn't worth mentioning. But tell me," she added, turning to Rosemary, "how long have you been in England? You *have* had an exciting life."

"We came home when I was six. Since then we have moved about quite a lot. We left Switzerland after father died, you know. I've never loved any place half so much. England is very lovely, but I miss the snow peaks and the lakes and the glorious blue skies. I shall never forget them."

All this time Natalia had remained silent, though she had pricked up her ears at the mention of Switzerland, and her eyes had a strange look in them."

"Funny that you should have lived there," she said at length. "I know a lot about it, for my uncle—mother's brother and my guardian—is there. I'm only living in England with friends till I leave school, then I'm going out to keep house for him for good."

"Indeed!" And Rosemary turned round eagerly to the girl whom up till now she had always rather avoided. "I wonder if mother

knew him. We used to entertain English people quite a lot, I know."

"Oh no, you wouldn't have known him. He has only been there for the last year. He was living with us in England for ages before that, when mother and father were alive. He's ever so handsome and popular."

"Is that why your German has gone West just lately?" demanded the Genius. "You used always to be getting commended for German prep, and now you never do. I expect the handsome guardian-uncle did it for you."

Natalia vouchsafed no reply to this. She had steered rather clear of Dorothy Carson since Rosemary's arrival. Dorothy seemed in her peculiar way to be championing the new girl, and, besides that, she never lost an opportunity of a sly but good-natured dig at Natalia, which that young lady did not by any means appreciate.

That night, alone in her bedroom, Natalia sat by the window and thought long and deeply. She was evidently undecided about something, for several times she got up, walked over to her writing desk and stood there for a moment before going back to her seat. At length, however, with a determined pressure of her lips, she switched on her reading lamp, sat

down at the desk and pulled some paper and a pen towards her.

“ I simply *must* find out that girl’s secret,” she said to herself. “ Quite possibly Uncle knows nothing, but, on the other hand, he might. Or someone he knows might remember. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind telling me if I make out that we’re friends and I want to help her.”

It was getting on for midnight before the letter was composed and written to Natalia’s satisfaction. She licked up the envelope and stamped it with a sigh of relief, which was followed by a yawn. Everybody else in the house was fast asleep. How tired she would be to-morrow, and it was geography first lesson.

Within half an hour Natalia, too, was asleep. She dreamt that Rosemary was being chased by a policeman, while Miss Warren stood on the roof of the High School, advising her to take the shortest cut to Siberia.

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER JOKE

“ROSEMARY,” said Beatrice Danvers, accosting her during break one morning towards the end of the Christmas term, “come along over to the pavilion. We’ve got a terrific joke on for College day next week, and everybody in the form is joining in.”

Behind the pavilion the Fourth Form was holding what they termed a “Mass Meeting.” Peggy was in the chair, or rather on the form, whilst the others clustered eagerly round her.

“The idea is this,” she was saying as Rosemary and Beatrice Danvers walked up. “Miss Long is down to take us for geography on Thursday afternoon, and she’s doing it out of sheer spite, because she can’t bear us, and she knows we hate geography. And she had the cheek to tell another student *in my presence* that for once those unruly girls in the Fourth were going to be disciplined.”

An indignant protest rose from the fourteen listening girls.

“What fearful cheek! I vote we give her a hot time,” suggested Natalia.

“Exactly,” continued Peggy. “That is what we propose to do, and the thing to settle now is how we shall do it. I’ve got a suggestion, if you’d like to hear it.”

“Rather—go on!” was the eager reply.

“Well, there’s a little shop in the High Street where they sell the most gorgeous jumping jacks—fireworks, you know. They are absolutely harmless, because we had them in our hall on Guy Fawkes Day, and they don’t make a terrific explosion that could be heard all over the school, but just a jolly little bang. They jump ever so high and give out showers of sparks—and you can get two for a penny. What do you say to treating Miss Long to a few?”

For a moment the girls were breathless. It was far and away the most daring escapade that had ever been suggested, and one or two of the less adventurous spirits were wondering what would happen if by any chance it got to Miss Loughton’s ears. It was not an altogether pleasant line of reflection.

“I suppose she won’t report us by any chance,” suggested Beatrice at length.

“Of course not,” retorted Natalia eagerly. “She simply couldn’t after having said that we

were going to be disciplined for once in our lives. It would let her down so hopelessly."

A delighted chuckle met this statement.

"Ah, yes. I hadn't thought of that," Beatrice said thoughtfully. "Well, suppose we take a vote on it. There must be a three-fifths majority in favour or we can't do it. You put it to the vote, Peggy."

Peggy jumped once more on to the form from which she had descended in order to listen more closely to the others.

"Those in favour?"

She glanced rapidly round the group. Every hand was raised.

"Carried unanimously," she cried, and jumped down once more.

The following Thursday morning an excited group of girls awaited the arrival of Peggy, who had been deputed to buy the fireworks. She entered the school gates about five minutes before the first bell rang.

"I was nearly late," she panted breathlessly, as the girls hurried her off to the cloak-room. "The silly old man had put them away in some dark corner of his shop, and had to fumble about for ages, finding them. Here they are"—producing a small brown parcel from her overcoat pocket—"I got half a dozen. That ought to be enough to finish her off."

At that moment the first bell clanged through the corridors, and stuffing the parcel back into her coat pocket, Peggy hurried off with the others to the form-room.

Morning school seemed interminable that day. Never before had the girls been so dense in algebra. Never had their replies in English literature been so vague and away from the point. And when it came to the last lesson for the morning, and they had to face up to the prospect of three-quarters of an hour's French irregular verbs, the girls felt as if the strain would be too much. Slowly the minutes dragged on. Surely the prefect had forgotten to ring the bell for dismissal. But, no! The form-room clock still said five more minutes. It was unendurable!

But there is an unfailing law in this world which at times brings its own comfort with it. It is that all things whether pleasant or unpleasant come at some time or another to their appointed end. This Thursday morning was no exception to the rule. There came the moment when the girls found themselves free, with nothing but the dinner hour between them and their daring enterprise.

At two o'clock the whole form met again in the pavilion. Dinner had been a rushed affair with some of the girls, but parents were used to

their daughters having to be back early for games practices or special classes, and mercifully no detailed enquiries had been made. The fireworks had been left with Gwen, who stayed to lunch, as she lived a little distance away from the school.

"I think," said Peggy, who had again taken the lead, "that half a dozen of us ought to have one each. It will be far more effective for six to go off at once than one after the other."

"Agreed," said Gwen, whose eyes were dancing with suppressed mischief. "Oh, *won't* it be gorgeous fun! Who will have them?"

"I think everyone in the front row, because they will be nearest to Miss Long," said Peggy reflectively. "That will be Rosemary, Beatrice, the Genius and myself. Then, Gwen, you had better have one up in your corner, and Natalia in the opposite corner."

A howl of disappointment rose from the eleven who were left out. May Bryant and Rita Brown especially bemoaned their fate.

"It can't be helped," said Peggy decisively. "We couldn't have fifteen—they would have made too much noise, and it's the best way to divide them up. At any rate, those of you who are not doing it will have by far the best view of the whole."

"How can we arrange to let them off to-

gether?" asked Rosemary, who was secretly delighted at finding herself one of the chosen ones.

"Yes, I was just coming to that. I thought we had better let her get well on into the lesson, so that she doesn't suspect anything. And let us all be perfect angels for the first half, then it will be all the greater shock. Then we'll arrange a certain moment by the clock to let them off. What time do you think?"

"Three o'clock," said Gwen. "I couldn't wait another second."

"Then you'll have to," Peggy replied, "for that's too early—only half an hour after we start. Remember, the later we do it the less time we give her for rebuking us. I think half-past three is plenty soon enough. The dismissal bell goes at ten to four. That gives her twenty minutes to get over it."

"Splendid," said May enthusiastically. "Have you arranged about lighting the things? Won't she hear you strike the matches?"

"Not if we do them quietly. I've got a box for each."

"Peggy, you *have* a brain," said the Genius admiringly. "What a pity you don't use it for work."

"I shall one day," Peggy said, with a smile; "but at present I'm refraining, because I don't

like to cut you out. Here's your jumping jack and a box of matches, Genius. You are sure you know how to set it off?"

"Of course I do. This really is rather fun, I don't like Miss Long myself," said Dorothy, beaming at Peggy over her spectacles.

At half-past two a decorous form awaited the arrival of Miss Long. Unlike her name, she was short and fat and bumptious. Gwen had once remarked that she bore a close resemblance to her pouter pigeon, in which statement she exactly hit the mark. Miss Long wore rimless pince-nez and a chain, at the end of which dangled many keys. She always carried an attaché-case in one hand and a pile of books under her arm.

As soon as she entered the door on this particular afternoon, the girls rose to their feet. Miss Long had only been at the College a short time, and did not know that the school only rose for their head mistress. She remembered, however, that no other form had shown her such respect, and felt flattered. These girls were evidently impressed by her.

The lesson had not progressed for more than a quarter of an hour before the student began to wonder how such false rumours concerning this form had gone round the College. Nothing could exceed their perfect

behaviour. Their courtesy was almost overpowering.

She quite enjoyed dropping her chalk or duster and seeing half a dozen girls rush to pick it up, and then return noiselessly to their places. Their knowledge of the Balkan States was certainly limited, but then she had known geography to be their weak point. During the second period, when she was taking Latin, no doubt they would be more intelligent.

It was exactly as she had expected. After the short interval the girls began to render quite a fair translation of the Latin prose she had put before them, and still their conduct was without reproach.

Miss Long began to drop the imperious air which she usually adopted when teaching, and became almost affable.

Twenty-five past three! Fifteen girls wondered if the round little figure sitting on the raised dais could hear the beating of their hearts above the loud ticking of the clock.

Miss Long sat with her hands on the edge of the table, looking intently at the Latin prose in front of her. The room was very quiet—only the clock and Beatrice Danvers' voice translating could be heard, when—

Ss—s—s—s. Bang! Bang! Ss—s—s. Bang!
Then—*Crash!*

For with a start the student had leapt to her feet, and in her alarm had given the table at which she was sitting a violent push. It was, unfortunately, nearer the edge of the dais than it usually stood, with the result that it crashed down to the floor, almost hitting the front desk as it fell.

Never had any form-room at the High School presented such an appearance as did the Fourth a few seconds after the half-hour.

Streams of red and blue ink were already running in every direction from the debris on the ground in front of the dais. Fireworks still jumped merrily along the floor, where the table stood, legs uppermost. Fifteen girls, some giggling hysterically, others rather horrified at the ultra success of their plans, gazed in a fascinated way at the scene before them. Miss Long, her face a mixture of anger and fright, stood upon the dais. An almost unreal air of catastrophe hung over the whole room.

At that moment the door opened and Miss Loughton entered.

CHAPTER VI

ANOTHER CLUE

“**G**WEN, will you and Rosemary kindly restore the table to its usual position. Beatrice—go and fetch a cloth from the kitchen and mop up that ink as quickly as you can, please. If you would care to go now, Miss Long, I will continue with this form.”

The girls watched breathlessly, whilst those who had been addressed did the head mistress's bidding. It seemed an eternity before Beatrice arrived back with the cloth. She did her work amidst a dead silence.

In a comparatively short time the room was more or less restored to order. True, deep ink-stains still adorned the floor, and six small charred heaps remained to tell the tale of the fireworks, but compared with what it had been when Miss Loughton entered the room, it was tidy.

There was not a girl in the Fourth who did not quake at the thought of what lay in front of her. Even the irrepressible Gwen lowered her eyes and braced herself for the worst.

After another minute of intense silence the head mistress spoke :

“ I feel that I can say nothing and pass no definite judgment until you have explained this situation—if explanation there be,” she said. “ Will one of you please do it ? ”

There was no response from any girl, save an uncomfortable fidgeting from the Genius.

“ Ah—then I must put it another way. Which of you was the originator of this afternoon’s proceedings ? ”

In a second Peggy was on her feet.

“ I was, Miss Loughton,” she said, with a very red face.

“ No, Miss Loughton—we all had a share in it, at least I did. It was only that Peggy took the chair and got them.” It was Gwen who spoke.

“ ‘ Took the chair and got them.’ Will you kindly be a little more lucid, and explain yourself, Gwendoline ? ”

“ I’m sorry, Miss Loughton. I meant that, when we had a meeting to discuss it, Peggy—Margaret, I mean—took the chair, and she got the fireworks, but we agreed—I mean wanted to, and six of us let them off.”

“ I understand, then, that this was a deliberately planned affair.”

“ All except the table.” And Gwen’s voice

shook ever so slightly at the remembrance of it. "We did the rest because—because, well—we didn't like Miss Long or geography—or—or——"

Her voice trailed feebly off, and again there was silence.

"There is no punishment too severe for such insubordination," said Miss Loughton, breaking the silence at length. "I shall therefore give you a detention which I hope you will remember for many a day. It is the only time within the history of the school that such a penalty has fallen upon an entire form. Instead of being present at the Annual Ringwood Match tomorrow afternoon, all of you will remain in your form-room and prepare two hours' geography, which will be extra to your ordinary preparation. I shall not reconsider my decision, neither shall I countenance any discussion with you about it. That is all I have to say. Now you may dismiss."

In absolute silence, but with a look of utter and blank dismay on their faces, the girls mechanically gathered together their books and made their way out of the class-room. It was the most miserable ending to a "spree" that they had ever known.

Once outside the school building, however, their grief found vent.

“It’s *awful—unthinkable*,” cried Peggy miserably. “The whole school goes mad about the Ringwood Match, but everybody knows we’re the keenest of the lot. I’ve dreamed of it for months past.”

“Why ever did she come in? I thought the staff always went home Thursday afternoons.”

“They do. Miss Loughton must have stayed behind to prep. I never remember her entering a form before on College day. Oh, isn’t it *unspeakably* ghastly? I could bear anything rather than that.” May Bryant was almost in tears over it.

Even Rosemary, who had never witnessed the famous Annual Ringwood Match, felt wretched as she made her way home that afternoon. She had already begun to be a keen net-ball player, and was looking forward enthusiastically to the great day of the struggle with the opponent school. Besides that—“Mother Mine” would not be too pleased about that afternoon. Now she came to think about it, perhaps it was rather hard luck on Miss Long, who wasn’t so very old, and had not done much teaching. Rosemary, with the others, wished the afternoon’s work undone.

Natalia also felt distinctly depressed as she entered the door of the house where she lived that evening. She was a keen “defence,” and

had her eye upon a place in the first team before the end of the next season. "It was hard luck—the hardest they had ever known," she decided.

Feeling thoroughly aggrieved, she was making her way straight up to her bedroom, when the maid who had opened the door called to her.

"You haven't noticed the letter for you on the table, miss," she said, picking up an envelope and handing it to her.

Natalia glanced carelessly at the envelope—then her expression changed.

"From uncle," she cried delightedly. "What ripping luck! To-day of all days, too."

Then taking two steps at a time she ran up to her room, and without waiting to take off her hat and coat, shut the door, switched on the light and tore open the envelope.

As she read the closely written lines her breath began to come faster. She glanced hurriedly through to the end, then threw the letter down with an excited exclamation.

"I *knew* it was something like that," she said to herself. "I *knew* it. Oh, won't I jolly well show her up to the girls now. Some of them have taken such a ridiculous fancy to her—plain, uninteresting kid that she is. She hates me, I know, and is only practising net ball so as to cut my chances of getting into the team."

She took up the letter again and began to re-read it. This is what she read :

“ MY DEAR NATALIA,

“ It is always a pleasure to hear from you, and I must say you are very faithful, the way in which you write to your old uncle. Time goes quickly, and it will not be long before you come and join me in this beautiful country. Then you shall have a really gay time.

“ It is rather remarkable that you should ask me about a Mr. Aston. But as you say his daughter is a friend of yours, I am giving you the little information I have gathered, for I am sure it would be better for you not to get intimate with her. In fact, I would rather that you kept clear of her altogether. You certainly must not visit at her home.

“ Strangely enough, I knew Paul Aston slightly when he was alive. He was a good enough fellow, but by no means a strong character. In order to make himself rich quickly he dabbled in some shady proceedings, by which he managed to extract a great deal of money out of a great number of people. Of course, the whole business crashed suddenly, as such things are apt to do. The night he discovered it, he went out and drowned himself, leaving his wife and little girl to fight their way

through the world, practically penniless. It was a coward's death, but then, as I said, he was not a strong man.

“Remember—this is *quite* private. You must not mention it anywhere, for it would not be fair to the girl. Do not let her know that you are aware of anything about her father, and above all do not get too friendly with her. Remember that I stand in the place of your father to you, and I do not like the thought of your getting mixed up with that family. By the way, has the girl a mother living ?

“Very best wishes for the Ringwood Match on Friday. I guess you are all terribly excited over it.

“Your affectionate

“UNCLE DICK.”

All that evening Natalia was in a peculiar frame of mind. She knew that she had it in her power to spoil Rosemary's school life for the time being, and she wanted to do it. At the same time, there was something within her which urged her to follow her uncle's advice and keep silent. She went to bed undecided.

CHAPTER VII

DETENTION

WITH the exception of the dejected Fourth Form, Rothermere High School was in a state of suppressed excitement the whole of the next morning. Mistresses were not very strict about lessons, for they, too, shared in the special interest of the day, and some of them were as keen as the girls themselves that the school should come off victorious. For two years running the rival school had been beaten. If Rothermere could vanquish the enemy, great indeed would be the rejoicing.

“If Miss Loughton doesn't put anyone to sit with us we might catch a glimpse of it out of the window,” said Gwen, as they waited for Mademoiselle and the third lesson of the morning.

May craned her neck as far out as it would go.

“You can only see the corner of the court,” she announced, “and, anyhow, only one could see it at a time, and there are seventeen of us. Oh *dear*.”

“Besides, I can't see Miss Loughton leaving

us on our lonesomes. Perhaps Miss Long will keep us company."

"No!" said Gwen decidedly. "Miss Loughton may be unnecessarily stern, but she's not inhuman. I expect Fräulein will sit with us."

Gwen's conjectures proved correct, for that afternoon, just as Ringwood High School was arriving at Rothermere, Fräulein, with a pile of exercise books in her arms, walked beaming into the form-room.

"Now I am ver sorry for sis, my Kindern," she said, smiling round on the gloomy faces in front of her. "It is ver sorrowful, but you were ver bad."

She paused, and glanced at a book in her hand.

"Miss Loughton haf set you work in ze geography book," she continued. "You haf to learn all you can about ze plains of Central Europe, and ten pages in ze book will tell you all you desire to know."

"Ten pages—*help*." May groaned aloud.

"All we desire to know," giggled Rosemary helplessly, "when we don't desire to know any of it."

Never before had it been so hard to concentrate on work. To give them their due, the girls stuck at it manfully for the first quarter of an hour, and did their best to master the

detested geography. Then the cheering began, and the sound of it floated up to them.

“Fräulein,” pleaded Gwen piteously, “could one of us just run down and see the score at half-time?”

“Sh! quietly, mein Kind. I will haf no talking.”

Gwen relapsed into silence. The whole situation was hopeless. There was not a break in the clouds anywhere.

It was just after a tremendous thunder of applause, when the girls felt they could not bear another minute of it, that a maid knocked at the class-room door, and entered with a note in her hand, which she gave to Fräulein.

As the little German read it, her face turned first white, then pink. The girls nearest her noticed that her hand trembled slightly as she turned over the page.

After she had finished reading she sat for a moment looking at the letter, and then the maid, who was young and new, volunteered some information which a more experienced servant would have kept to herself.

“The gentleman said he would very much like to see you, if you could spare a minute, miss. He seemed that anxious, he did.”

The girls exchanged meaning glances. One or two of Natalia’s friends tittered.

“ I know not what it would be right to do,” said Fräulein pathetically. “ You are such ver bad girls if I leave you.”

“ No, Fräulein, we won't be bad, really, if you ought to go. We'll promise not to look out of the window,” said Gwen.

“ You will all, on the honour of your school, not run down to net-ball ? ” Fräulein asked, peering anxiously at the girls over her spectacles.

“ Yes, Fräulein, we promise,” they said, and with a fluttering heart she went down to meet the friend she had not seen since they parted five years before.

When she had gone the girls heaved a sigh of relief.

“ What a mercy she didn't say we were not to talk,” the Genius remarked, with a grin. “ I was afraid every minute she was going to.”

“ Her thoughts were too full of the gentleman who was that anxious to see her, I expect.” And Beatrice chuckled.

“ Bother the gentleman ! ” exclaimed Gwen. “ I wish we knew the score. I'm not too sure about our winning ; we're not so strong this year as we were last.”

“ It's our defence that is so weak,” said May. “ The shooting and centre play is all right, but Alice Wright's defending is terrible at times, and so is the goal defence.”

"Alice is leaving at the end of the term. She told me so," volunteered another member of the Fourth. "I wonder who'll take her place?"

"Why, Natalia, of course," said Rita immediately. "She is in the second, and there is nobody else so good."

"Isn't there? It's my opinion that somebody else in this form will knock Natalia out pretty soon." Peggy threw a meaning glance at some other special net-ball enthusiasts.

Natalia went rather white.

"Who do you think will do that?" she asked quietly.

"Why, Rosemary, of course. She's taller than you, and I heard Captain saying the other day what a ripping reach she had, and that she had several times noticed her playing in knock-up games. Games Captain doesn't say things like that without meaning them. I wouldn't be an atom surprised if Rosemary hadn't a first team badge this time next year, and won't we be jolly proud of the first member of the Fourth to get it."

"Really—I hope you will be equally proud of her when you hear that her father was a thief and a suicide."

The effect of this statement on the class was like a thunderbolt. Natalia had risen to her

feet and her eyes were blazing with anger. To do her justice, she had come to school practically determined to say nothing about the letter, at any rate for the present, but Peggy's unfortunate words had roused every bit of ill-feeling in her, and for the moment she lost control of herself.

"Natalia, how *can* you be so horrid? I don't believe a word of what you say. You only talk like that because you are jealous." Gwen threw a troubled look in the direction of Rosemary, who was sitting, white and still, in her desk.

"Yes, and you ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself," May added quickly. "Fancy any Rothermere High School girl being so mean. I wish you were in any other form but ours."

"Thank you. You are pleased to have the daughter of a gaolbird in your midst, though. A case of 'birds of a feather,' I suppose."

Several girls smiled at Natalia and murmured approval. Then Rosemary suddenly jumped to her feet. Her cheeks, which had been deadly white, were flaming now, and her voice was almost choked with passion.

"It is all untruths," she cried, "wicked, awful untruths. You have made it up, just because you hate me and want others to hate me, too."

"I have made none of it up," said Natalia

more quietly. "I have absolute proof in my satchel that what I have said is true."

The atmosphere of the form-room was by this time electric. Fräulein, and even the match, had been forgotten, so tense had the position become.

"Proof? What do you mean?" asked one girl curiously.

"I have a letter from my uncle in Switzerland. I happened to mention Rosemary Aston's name in a letter to him, and it appears that he knew her father. He tells me his history. Perhaps you would like me to read it, as some of you seem inclined to doubt my word?"

"No, we don't want to see your silly letter," said Gwen uneasily, "and we shouldn't believe it if we did. You're the horriest girl in the school, Natalia. I don't believe anybody else would think of being so unkind."

"I don't see where the unkindness comes in," broke in Rita Brown. "If what Natalia says is true, Rosemary ought not to be at a school like Rothermere. You know we've always had our suspicions since . . ."

"Sh . . . here's Fräulein!" May Bryant, glad of an excuse to stop the conversation, had heard a footstep coming down the corridor. A few seconds later Fräulein, with a very red face, entered the room.

“ You are ver good girls,” she said, noticing the order of the class-room. “ I shall give of you a good report to Miss Loughton.”

But even this cheering news failed to evoke any enthusiasm. Their “ college spree ” had been more far-reaching in its results than they had ever dreamed. It had robbed a whole form of witnessing the utter defeat of their rival school, and it had ruined a girl’s reputation.

For from that time on, though Gwen and May did their best to shield Rosemary, the story began to spread, and girls who till then had been quite friendly, began to avoid her. It was never again discussed openly in front of her, but Rosemary, sensitive to a fault, felt the gradual aversion to her that was stealing through the school.

There were times when she felt inclined to tell Mrs. Aston what was happening, and ask her for the true facts of the case, but every time her love and trust in her mother prevented her. Besides, what would be the good now that Natalia’s story had gone through the school? It would probably only make things worse, and it was sure to upset Mrs. Aston. Rosemary knew that her mother could not afford to send her to another school, but it would worry her to know that her child was being made unhappy. No! Rosemary must

just bear it in silence, and hope that one day the mystery would clear itself.

All chances of her getting into the First seemed gone now, for it was seldom that anybody wanted her to join in a practice game. Gwen and May and the Genius were very good to her, but it was not fair on them to take advantage of it, she decided. So more and more she wandered off by herself during break, and as the winter wore into spring, and the spring into early summer, her eyes began to take on a look of settled sadness, and Mrs. Aston was puzzled to account for it. Still Rosemary said no word of complaint to anyone ; but sometimes on Saturday afternoons, when her mother was busy with work, she would steal away to a lonely spot on the seashore, and there, with only the waves and the seagulls to hear her, she would sob out :

“ If only everything could be cleared up—for your sake, Mother mine.”

CHAPTER VIII

SMUGGLERS' CAVE AND AN ADVENTURE

“**T**HANK goodness we shall have no lessons to-morrow! My brain is just about at melting point.”

Gwen fanned herself with a piece of blotting-paper, and looked longingly out of the window. It was only the beginning of June, but the heat was oppressive. As the girls sat in their hot form-room at prep. they cast envious eyes at the privileged Sixth, who sat with Miss Loughton under a shady almond tree in the grounds.

“I'm living for to-morrow,” announced May enthusiastically. “A middle school picnic is the loveliest thing out.”

“Where are we going?” asked Rosemary, who had been away from school for several days on account of her mother's health.

“To Rocky Point—it's about three miles along the coast from here—just past Smugglers' Cave. We can't bathe actually at the point, but there's a lovely place just before you get to it.”

“What fun! Shall we all take our bathing things, then?”

“Yes, rather! Don't I wish we were there now.” And even the Genius joined in the sigh which this remark called forth.

Punctually at 9.30 the next morning, fifty girls from the middle school, accompanied by several mistresses, set out for their annual picnic. A car containing Miss Loughton and the lunch was to follow a little later. Practically every girl carried her bathing suit rolled up in a towel.

“The minute we arrive I'm going to fall in the sea,” Beatrice said complacently. “Just think of the hundred poor things stewing away in school. Won't they be green with jealousy!”

“The time is fast approaching when we shall sit and stew and they will play.” The Genius threw an encouraging glance at Beatrice.

“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,” quoted Beatrice. “Likewise—‘a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.’ Let the future take care of itself, but to-day I'm going to enjoy myself.”

It took quite an hour to reach Rocky Point, but as the sun was not yet at its hottest the girls enjoyed every minute of the walk.

It was, as May had said, a lovely place at which the girls at length arrived. A mile or so

of smooth yellow sand terminated where the cliff jutted out into the sea for some distance. The Point was composed of sharp rocks and boulders, and offered endless opportunities for scrambles and hide-and-seek.

As soon as they came within a short distance of the Point, the mistress in charge called a halt.

"Any of you who like may bathe now," she said. "Miss Warren will remain with you. Be careful not to go out of your depth, for the current is sometimes a little strong round the point."

With a whoop of delight the majority of the girls made for the rocks.

"Come and bag a good dressing-room," said May, seizing Rosemary by one arm and Gwen by the other. "Oh, *bother*—Natalia has got my own special rock. How mean! Never mind, I know of another."

"By the way, can you swim, Rosemary?" asked Gwen, as the three girls quickly undressed behind the shelter of a huge boulder.

"Yes, I love it. This is the first time I've been in here, of course, but during summer hols. I nearly live in the sea."

"Good. You can teach me the American crawl. Come along! Oh, isn't this too heavenly for words!"

A minute later the peaceful scene resounded

with cries of merriment and girls' shrill voices. How glorious it was to feel the cool water, and to watch the ripples of sunshine dancing on the calm surface of the sea! For some time Rosemary floated on her back, dreamily watching the fleecy clouds as they moved across the blue sky. Life was very good, after all, she thought.

"Here she is. Duck her!"

The next moment Rosemary found herself rolled over and down. She got up spluttering, her mouth and eyes full of water. Gwen and May were dancing with delight at her side.

"You wait!" cried Rosemary, rubbing the water out of her eyes, "I'll have my revenge." And using both hands she began to pummel the water until the two friends called pax.

At that moment Beatrice Danvers swam up to the three.

"Come along," she said. "Peggy has brought her striped polo ball. It's a new one and a beauty. We're going to play water net-ball, and we want you three."

Before long Rosemary came to the conclusion that she was going to have the jolliest time of her life that day. Never had the girls played such a game of net-ball. Even Miss Warren looked up from her book and smiled as the shrieks of mirth travelled to her over the water. At length the Genius, who had been

persuaded to play "just so as to make it funnier," threw the ball with such might that it flew far over the head of the farthest player, and began to dance merrily out to sea.

"I'll fetch it," cried Gwen, and striking out in the direction of the ball, she soon reached it and turned to come back.

"How slowly she is swimming," said Rita Brown. "Why—whatever's the matter? She has gone under."

Immediately a dozen girls struck out towards the spot where Gwen had been a few seconds previously, and where the ball still floated. There was now no sign of their schoolfellow.

It needs very little to create a sensation, and within half a minute of Gwen's disappearance every girl was agog with excitement or fright. It was just then that Gwen reappeared a short distance away from them, laughing and shaking the water off her face.

She waved merrily to the dozen who had gone to rescue her.

"Pity it isn't the first of April, you sillies," she cried. "I was only swimming under water. Well, I'm going in now, having nearly been drowned nobly trying to save Peggy's ball. No doubt my brave rescuers will also want to get dry."

By the time the girls had dressed, vented their

wrath upon Gwen, and assembled at the Point, Miss Loughton arrived with the lunch, which was set out on the sands.

A merry half-hour followed, for, as Natalia remarked, the mistresses were so different out of school. Even Miss Loughton herself told riddles and funny stories, until Rosemary wondered if she could possibly be the same person as the head mistress of whom, in her secret heart, she was the tiniest bit afraid.

"Now, girls," said Miss Loughton, when lunch was at length finished, "you are free to do whatever you like for the afternoon. Nobody must bathe, of course, and don't get into mischief; but go and enjoy yourselves, and be back here for tea at four o'clock. A whistle will be blown, but if you go too far away you may not hear it, so be within reach by that time."

May came up and seized Rosemary by the hand.

"Come along," she said. "Beatrice and Gwen and Peggy and I are going to explore Smugglers' Cave. We've done it heaps of times, of course, but it's always thrilling. We asked the Genius to come, but she's got a book and wants to read."

It did not take more than a few minutes to reach the cave, which was a wide tunnel, dug into the cliff. The sea evidently came into it, for at the mouth the seaweed was moist and slimy, and the rock was damp.

For a blissful half-hour the girls wandered in and out of the various passages, waking the echoes with their talk and laughter, and peering into the gloomy recesses of the rock. As they got further in, the darkness became deeper, until at length they were feeling their way along the sides of the cave.

“What sillies we were not to bring candles. It looks so thrilling by candlelight. Oh, *bother!*” And Peggy ruefully rubbed her elbow, which had just collided with a jagged edge of rock.

“What is that? Listen!” Rosemary stopped suddenly, and the others followed her example.

From somewhere ahead of them there came a distinct moan, which was repeated after a few seconds.

Peggy shivered.

“Oh, it’s horrid,” she said nervously. “Do let’s go back.”

“Nonsense, Peggy—it’s either a human being or an animal in pain. We must go on, and find out.”

Silently now the five girls made their way as quickly as they could over the uneven floor. Every now and then the groan sounded again, each time getting nearer. Then it ceased, and after the girls had stumbled on for some distance, Rosemary, who was leading, stopped.

“I believe it was somewhere about here,” she said, “but however are we to find out?”

"Oh—I know I'm an awful coward, but I'm terrified—absolutely terrified," cried Peggy.

"Do be quiet, Peggy. We all are for the matter of that." Gwen's voice had the slightest suspicion of a shake in it.

It was, indeed, a terrifying position. The girls were in darkness, with the exception of a ray of light which came from an opening in the roof of the cave a short distance behind them. They were barely able to walk without stumbling, and likely at any moment to come upon the object of their search. For a few minutes even Rosemary felt her courage oozing.

Then, suddenly, distinctly, the moan sounded again. Peggy clutched frantically hold of May.

"It's over our heads," she whispered. "Oh, *what* is it?"

"It isn't in the cave at all. It's out on the cliff," Rosemary said, speaking quite calmly. "It's near that hole in the roof back there, but the sound would travel along the rock, that's why we heard it so far back."

They made their way back until they stood under the hole, which when examined closely was bigger than they had thought.

"I believe I could get through that if you gave me a lift up," said Rosemary. "At any rate, I'm going to try."

Carefully the four girls hoisted their school-

fellow till her hand reached the cleft. She clutched it and held on.

"Give me another hoist," she panted, "only go gently or I'll bang my head."

The four girls did as they were told, and within a short time Rosemary had wormed her way out of the hole, and found herself alone on the side of the cliff.

She looked round nervously. There was nobody in sight. The part of the cliff on which she stood formed a kind of plateau until it reached the sand, where there was a drop of about twenty feet. "That," Rosemary thought, "was why they had heard the noise so clearly. The cave was immediately under this flat part of cliff which formed its roof. But, in any case, where did the moan come from?"

She began to search carefully, and before long the four girls waiting underneath heard her give a cry. A few seconds later she was at the opening.

"I've found it," she said. "It's a little boy, and I should think his ankle is sprained, or broken or something. You had better get back to the beach. I can carry him down this flat part, but you'll have to help me get him down to the sand."

When her chums had gone, Rosemary went back to the little fellow, who was lying, white

and still, behind a gorse bush. He had evidently been climbing from the top of the cliff, searching for flowers, and had tripped over a boulder and fallen, injuring his foot. As Rosemary bent over him he opened his eyes and moaned again.

Very carefully the girl began to lift him. He was quite small—only about six, Rosemary decided, and poorly dressed. She wondered who his parents were, and how they should get him to them.

When she reached the edge of the cliff with her burden, she found her schoolfellows already waiting for her. She put the child on the grass, and, lying down flat, peered over the edge.

“It’s too steep for us to reach him,” May said from below. “We couldn’t anything like touch his feet if you held him. Whatever shall we do?”

Rosemary thought hard for a moment or two. Then she said: “You four must roll up your girdles into balls and throw them up to me, and I’ll join them and tie them under his arms like reins. Then I can lower him—only do be careful not to touch his left foot. The ankle is terribly swollen. I’ve taken his shoe off.”

After one or two unsuccessful attempts, Rosemary found herself in possession of all the girdles. She tied them firmly together and fastened them round the unconscious child’s

shoulders. Then, gently lifting him and keeping a tight hold of the girdles, she began to lower him over the side of the cliff.

It was a tremendous strain upon Rosemary's strength and nerve, but she stuck it bravely, gradually letting out the length of girdle until the girls below were able to reach the little fellow and lay him gently on the sand.

Then they looked up at their schoolfellow.

"How are you going to get down, Rosemary?" May asked.

"I can't, anyhow, leap down this precipice," was the reply. "I think I could better get down the way I came up, if two of you could help me. Peggy, you and Beatrice had better take the child back to Miss Loughton at once, for she'll know what to do with him, and then, if Gwen and May will go back through the tunnel to the opening in the roof, they could help me down."

Getting down was not quite such an easy business as the getting up had been, but by dint of much wriggling, Rosemary managed to land safely, and within twenty minutes or so the three girls were once more walking along the sandy shore towards Rocky Point.

"Well, *what* an adventure we've had!" Gwen said at length. "Rosemary, you've been a brick. It was all through you that the child was

rescued. I don't believe we'd have gone on unless you had been leading, and then the boy would have died without anyone knowing."

"Nonsense!" Rosemary said hurriedly, "someone would have found him, for a little chap like that wouldn't be without anyone to look after him. He must have strayed off by himself. I wonder to whom he belongs."

They reached Rocky Point to find a crowd of excited girls waiting for them. There was also a man bending over the little boy.

Miss Loughton came forward to them.

"You are quite unhurt, Rosemary?" she asked anxiously. "We have heard about your coolness and bravery, dear, and the little boy's father, who was searching the beach, wants to thank you, I know."

Rosemary shrank back, but the man pressed eagerly forward.

"Indeed, miss," he said, taking off his cap, "I don't know how to thank you, that I don't. But for you, my little chap might still have been alone up there. Goodness knows how he got up to the cliff, for we were on the beach. We've been searching for him this last hour, we have. I do thank you with all my heart, miss, and if there's anything I can ever do to repay you, remember I'm at your service. My name's Reed, 52 High Street."

With great care the little boy, whose ankle was badly sprained, was carried up to the cliff, where the car was waiting to take him into Rothermere.

To Rosemary, who for the last five months had known nothing but increasing aloofness on the part of her schoolfellows, the next few hours were almost embarrassing.

The girls pressed round her, wanting to know all the details of the adventure. They patted her on the back and sang her praises. The Genius said she should write to the local paper about it, and on the way home everybody wanted to walk with her, and hear fresh details.

Only Natalia and Rita, with some of their special friends, kept aloof. Rosemary said nothing, but she noticed it. She happened to be standing fairly near to them when Miss Warren said :

“ How pleased Mrs. Aston will be, Rosemary. I don't suppose you will give her a fair version of the story, but I know Miss Loughton will write to her. She will, indeed, have cause to be proud of you.”

The girls murmured assent, but from Natalia's group Rosemary distinctly caught the whisper :

“ She has need to be proud of someone, poor thing.”

She shot an angry glance at them, and then moved away to join Gwen and Matches.

CHAPTER IX

A SALE AND A MISHAP

AS the summer term wore on, Rosemary began to be much happier at school. The Smugglers' Cave incident had won for her a considerable measure of popularity, and although there was a fair proportion of girls who still stood aloof and looked the other way when she approached, many who had previously ignored her were now quite friendly.

But as Rosemary's school life became happier, so her anxiety about her mother increased. The continuous spell of hot weather had made Mrs. Aston droop more and more, until she began to look so thin and delicate that it gave Rosemary a pang every time she looked at her.

There were days when Mrs. Aston hardly ate anything, and was almost unable to work; and, to add to the trouble, their little stock of money was getting low, for they were practically dependent upon what Mrs. Aston earned.

"Mother mine," Rosemary said one afternoon, when her mother had refused to eat any tea, "I want to ask you something."

" Yes, dear, what is it ? "

" I want to know if I may leave school ? "

" Why, Rosemary, I thought you were so happy there ? "

" Yes, mother, I am, but I just can't bear to see you working yourself to death for me. I want to go out and earn some money for you."

Her mother stroked her hair fondly.

" No, my child," she said firmly. " You are barely fifteen yet. You must stay at school and learn all you can, so as to fit yourself to work later on. Don't worry, dear. We shall be all right. We have a heavenly Father, you know, and He cares."

But Rosemary had to fight back the tears, as she looked at her mother's wan face, and thought of all the comforts and little luxuries she ought to have. If only she could get some money !

Towards the end of June the weather suddenly broke for a day or two, and the rain came. It was teeming down one afternoon as the Fourth sat in the Gym., bemoaning the fact that they would miss their net-ball for the second time that week.

" And do you realise that we shall have to have the Orphanage Sale indoors if it keeps on like this ? " Peggy asked.

There was a cry of disappointment as Peggy

made this statement. Every year the girls of Rothermere High School worked for an Annual Sale on behalf of a large Orphanage in the district, and "Sale Day" was quite one of the events of the year.

It was held, when possible, in the grounds, and the girls loved wearing their prettiest summer frocks, and proudly escorting their relatives round the different stalls. At night time the grounds were illuminated with Chinese lanterns and fairy lights. It would be a bitter blow if, after all their hard work, the Sale had to be held indoors.

The date was fixed for the first week in July, and many and anxious were the taps at the barometer and the glances at the weather forecasts for several days before.

In the end fortune favoured them, the rainy spell gave over and left the earth far more beautiful in its green freshness than it had been before. The actual day of the Sale was as perfect as could be wished.

All the morning the girls were busy decorating their stalls and hanging lanterns from the branches of trees. By twelve o'clock everything was ready, and the effect was charming.

Miss Loughton, making a final tour of the grounds, paused when she reached the Fourth Form stall, which was placed under a large

beech tree, from which several gaily coloured lanterns were suspended.

“ I do congratulate you, girls,” she said, with a smile. “ You have achieved wonders with your stall. Wherever did you manage to get a table so much larger than the others? It gives you a much better chance of displaying your goods.”

“ It isn't really a table, Miss Loughton,” said May. “ We thought our form-room table wouldn't be big enough, so the Gen—Dorothy, I mean, suggested getting two trestles from the Gym., and the gardener borrowed the top from somewhere, and we've hung the things so that you can't see what it is.”

“ Splendid,” the head mistress answered, and passed on to the next stall.

By three o'clock that afternoon quite a crowd had collected in the school grounds. The girls looked charming in their dainty frocks, and as Miss Loughton looked at them, she felt justly proud of her school.

Rosemary, in her rather old white dress, felt somewhat out of it. Mrs. Aston had refused to come, both on account of her health and from the fact that she could not afford to buy anything.

“ You see, dear,” she explained, “ the girls would think it strange if I did not make pur-

chases at your stall, and my health is quite sufficient reason for keeping me away. But go and enjoy yourself, and then come home and tell me all about it."

Directly the Sale had been opened, business commenced in real earnest, and the girls began to do their utmost to lure people to their stalls.

One of the first to approach the Fourth Form stall was the curate of the Parish Church, well known to all as extremely shy and nervous out of the pulpit. Gwen saw him coming, and hailed him from behind the table.

"Come along, Mr. Riley. Do buy something off our stall first. Now what can I sell you?"

"I was wanting a . . . er . . . book of some description."

"Oh yes," Gwen said, with remarkable composure. "How about this? You want it for a child, I suppose?" displaying a brightly coloured rag book.

"Er . . . no . . . I was meaning something more suitable for my own reading. Perhaps you have nothing of that description, and I am giving you trouble for nothing," he added apologetically.

"Not a bit." Gwen was a good saleswoman, and determined to make her customer buy something.

"Rita," she called across the stall, "pass me

over that pile of poetry books on the corner of the table, will you ? ”

Rita did so, and at that moment the most beautiful of the Chinese lanterns, which hung just over where the books had been, fell from the branch to which it had been attached.

“ Oh, *what* a nuisance,” wailed Rita. “ It looked *so* pretty, but we couldn’t reach it without the steps, and we can’t fetch them now. It quite spoils the look of our stall. A chair wouldn’t reach, but—look—couldn’t I reach it by standing on the stall, if you held on ? ”

“ Indeed, no ! ” interrupted the curate gallantly. “ Allow me.” And before anyone could stop him he had seized the lantern in one hand, and leapt awkwardly on to the end of the table which jutted out beyond the trestle.

With a shriek Rita put out her hand to prevent him, but it was too late, and she drew back to escape being hit by the table as it turned turtle in mid-air.

A shower of articles fell around her, there was a thud as the table fell against the trunk of the beech tree, and the curate . . . ?

A few minutes later they dug him out. He was fortunately unhurt, save for a few bruises. Several *crêpe de Chine* handkerchiefs clung to his coat, a hair tidy hung from one ear, whilst a box of tooth powder had emptied itself over his

hair. One hand still convulsively grasped the Chinese lantern, whilst in the other he unconsciously clutched a rag doll.

"Er . . . er . . . I'm terribly sorry," he stammered, when at last they had him on his feet. "I . . . er . . . don't quite understand . . . er . . ."

He stopped in confusion at finding himself the centre of what seemed to him the biggest crowd of ladies he had ever seen in his life.

Miss Loughton, with her ready tact, came to the rescue.

"It is quite all right, I assure you, Mr. Riley," she said. "I am afraid you are the one who has suffered most. It was a trestle table, and in your kindness you unfortunately stepped on the end. Now I will fetch the porter, so that he can take you across into the school, and the Fourth Form, with Fräulein to assist them, will redecorate their stall as quickly as possible. I hope," she added, turning to the crowd, "that our visitors will not let this stall suffer by the accident."

In a few minutes the Fourth Form, looking alternately vexed and amused, were on their knees picking up handfuls of clothing and fancy goods, and replacing them on their stall.

Rosemary, kneeling beside Fräulein, thought it was the funniest sight she had ever witnessed.

There was a smile on her face as she gathered together an armful of things and took them to the end of the stall to sort out.

Almost mechanically she placed the articles back on the table, when suddenly her eye caught the flash of a stone, and from the centre of a muslin apron she picked up a small, heart-shaped brooch, set with diamonds.

Her first instinct was to give it to Miss Loughton, and she was just going to make her way across when the temptation came.

"I expect it belongs to one of those wealthy people," she thought. "They would never miss it. It is only a small one, and they will have heaps of others. Mother mine has not even the necessaries of life. If I could sell this now. . . ."

Her reflections were cut short by Gwen running up to her. Rosemary hastily slipped her hand with the brooch in it into her pocket.

"What do you think," Gwen said, with a broad grin on her face, "Mr. Riley has gone off with our rag doll. Do you think he'll bring it back?"

"I don't know. How silly you are, Gwen. Why don't you get the stall to rights again?"

Gwen stared at her friend in amazement. She had never known Rosemary like this before.

"Why, Rosemary, what's the matter?" she

said. "You were laughing yourself a minute ago."

But, without answering, Rosemary walked away.

The rest of the afternoon and evening progressed more or less uneventfully. The curate did not make another appearance, but the rag doll, much to Gwen's relief, was returned to its rightful place.

As soon as the Fourth Form stall was put right, the visitors flocked towards it, and at the end of the Sale, when the results were announced, they had the proud distinction of heading the list.

"I believe the curate was really the making of our stall," said Peggy Seaton, as the girls crowded the cloak-rooms to put on their hats and coats that evening.

"I'm sure he was. And, oh dear, *wasn't* it funny? I shall weep over this whenever I think of it. Won't daddy enjoy hearing about it!" And May chuckled again at the memory of the catastrophe.

"Do you know where Rosemary is?" Beatrice enquired, as the girls were making their way out into the summer night. "I am walking her way home, and mother has gone on, so we could go together."

"Don't know—I haven't seen her for ages,"

Gwen said shortly. "She was frightfully snappy to me this afternoon, and I don't think I've spoken to her since."

"Her mother wasn't well enough to come. Perhaps she minded," suggested May.

"Yes, it may have been that. Well, if you see her, give her my love, Beatrice. Good night!" And Gwen disappeared through the door.

For a little longer Beatrice waited about, but at length, seeing no sign of her friend, she set off home by herself.

Meanwhile, Rosemary sat in her bedroom alone. Her mother was talking to a visitor downstairs, and Rosemary did not feel inclined to join them. She sat there for some time, a hard, defiant look on her face. Once or twice she took out the little diamond brooch and looked at it. At length she undressed quickly and got into bed.

CHAPTER X

THE LOST BROOCH

“ROSEMARY, dear, are you sure you wouldn't rather stop at home to-day? You look so white and poorly. Would you like to stay in this morning? You haven't told me anything about yesterday's Sale yet.”

Rosemary reached down her school hat from its peg.

“No, thank you, Mother,” she said, “and don't be worried if I'm a bit late home for dinner,” she added hurriedly. “I've got a good deal on just now.”

“Anything special?” her mother asked. “I hope you are not doing too much. You know what all work and no play does, don't you?”

“Yes—but it isn't that—they've asked me to be in a form play for breaking-up concert, and I believe the Middle School Mag. is being read either to-day or to-morrow after school, and other things,” Rosemary said vaguely.

“Very well, dear. I can trust you to be sensible.”

Rosemary's heart ached as she walked quickly down the High Street in the direction of the school. Her mother's last words rang in her ears and seemed to beat time with her hurrying footsteps. "I can trust you—trust you—trust you. . . ."

Rosemary shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"I'm not doing it for myself," she murmured defiantly. "It's for Mother—and those rich people—they won't even notice the loss of such a little thing."

She put her hand into her coat pocket and touched the little parcel there. In one of the back streets there was a second-hand jeweller's. Before dinner she would take it there. Rosemary knew little of the world, and it did not strike her that a High School girl wishing to raise money on a brooch might excite some curiosity in the mind of the jeweller. She hurried on blindly, looking hard at the pavement. Near the end of the High Street her progress was impeded by a man coming out of a doorway. They all but collided.

"Sorry," said Rosemary, hardly looking at the man, and preparing to go on.

"As much my fault, missy," answered a voice which somehow sounded familiar. Then she heard an exclamation of surprise.

“ Well ! If it ain’t the little miss that saved my Jackie.”

Rosemary looked up in surprise and saw the man, whose name was Reed, standing beside her.

“ Oh, fancy meeting you ! ” she exclaimed. “ How is your little boy ? Has he quite recovered from his accident ? ”

“ As bonny as a lark, bless ’im,” the man replied. “ He’d like fine ter see you, missy. I s’pose you couldn’t spare a minute now. I lives over this ’ere shop, an’ the missus is in, too.”

Rosemary glanced up and her heart gave a bound. It was a jeweller’s—not a very first-class one certainly, but still—could she—dare she . . . ?

Before she knew what she was doing, the girl was following Reed up a dark, narrow staircase, and at length into a small room. A woman with her sleeves rolled up was busy clearing away the remains of breakfast. A strong scent of smoke and kippers pervaded the room. It made Rosemary feel rather giddy.

“ Well now, mother, if this isn’t the little lady we’ve often talked of. Billy boy, come and show yourself.”

The child whom the girls had rescued looked at Rosemary shyly. She wondered what she

was expected to say. Her brain was so busy working in other directions that it was hard to concentrate.

“ Do you live here ? ” she asked at length.

“ Yes, miss,” the woman answered. “ We caretake the shop, and my man helps with the odd jobs—repairs and such like things. The rooms are none too big, but we’re quite comfortable. Maybe you’d like to see them ? ”

“ I’m afraid I can’t stop now, or I shall be late for school,” said Rosemary quickly. “ But perhaps I’ll come in and see you some other time.”

She turned to go, and the man followed her. Rosemary did not speak again until they reached the ground. Then she said nervously :

“ I suppose you don’t . . . that is, you couldn’t, sell a brooch for me ? ”

The man looked surprised. He thought all the young ladies at the High School must be rich, but concluded that perhaps this one wanted some extra pocket money.

“ Well, I daresay I could sell it for you as well as anyone, miss, and it’s glad I am to be able to do anything for you. What kind of a brooch is it ? ”

Rosemary pulled it hastily out of her pocket, and with fingers that trembled slightly unwrapped it.

Reed took it to the light and looked at it carefully.

"It isn't worth very much, miss," he said at length. "They're small diamonds, and not very good ones. An old pattern, too. I might get as much as ten shillings for it, though. How would that do?"

Rosemary flushed.

"It would do splendidly," she said. "I'd be glad if nobody else need know about it. You see I'm doing it for mother. She's ill."

Reed looked at the girl admiringly.

"Of course I'll keep it dark," he said. And to himself he added, "Fine young lady that—selling her brooch for the sake of her mother." If he could have seen something of the tumult going on at that moment in Rosemary's heart, he might have changed his opinion.

"When shall I call for the money?" she asked, as the man opened the door for her.

"I'll have it ready by to-morrow afternoon," he answered. "If you'd like ter call in on your way home, it will be waiting for you."

"Very well, I'll come then, but I shan't be able to stay," she added hurriedly, at the remembrance of the smoke and kippers. "Will you be in the shop?"

"I'll be in the back, and if you just ask for Reed, they'll fetch me. Well, good morning,

missy, and I hopes yer mother'll be better soon."

Once outside, Rosemary took to her feet and ran. Even so, she arrived at school ten minutes late, only just in time for morning assembly.

Having reported herself to her form mistress and received an order mark, Rosemary slipped into her place in the hall, hardly noticing Gwen's welcoming smile. How desperately unhappy she felt. There was a feeling within her as if a heavy leaden weight were pressing her down. And why had Miss Loughton chosen that particular hymn that morning?

For every virtue we possess,
And every conquest won,
And every thought of holiness
Are His alone.

Rosemary stood with her head bowed and a hard, defiant look on her face. "Virtue—conquests—thoughts of holiness"—they were not for her to sing of.

Prayers had ended, and the girls were just preparing to go to their form-rooms when Miss Loughton said:

"I have one or two things to speak of, so will you all wait, please."

"The first thing I want to mention," she began, "is the unparalleled success of the Orphanage Sale yesterday. As you all know,

this is an institution in which I am particularly interested, and it is most gratifying that the school is able, this year, to send up more than it has ever sent before."

A great deal of cheering followed this announcement. The girls were genuinely fond of their head mistress, and the fact that she was so pleased added considerably to the success of the Sale in their minds.

When the cheering had died away, Miss Loughton spoke again.

"Fräulein has asked me to announce," she said, "that during the Sale she lost a small diamond brooch. She did not notice the loss until she reached home, and hoped that someone might have picked it up. Has anyone seen it?"

A dead silence followed the question. All eyes were either on the head mistress or on Fräulein, and nobody noticed that Rosemary's face had gone very white.

"I am sorry," Miss Loughton continued, "for though Fräulein tells me it was not worth very much in itself, I know she valued it. I will have all the remaining articles examined to see if by any chance it has caught amongst them, and perhaps you would all ask in your homes if anyone saw such a brooch lying about. Now you may go to your classes."

Rosemary felt almost as if she would go mad, as the girls marched into their form-room. Fräulein's brooch! It must have dropped from her dress as she helped pick up the articles from off the stall. Was it too late to get it back even now? Would Reed have sold it by lunch time?"

How Rosemary got through that morning she never knew. Surely every girl in the form was watching her and reading her secret. How Natalia would triumph if it were ever discovered. She would be expelled—of course she would. No thief would be allowed to stay at Rothermere High School.

"I say, Rosemary, you're awfully quiet and glum to-day. What's the matter?" asked Gwen, coming up to her during break and linking arms.

"Nothing. Why?"

"Well, I thought perhaps you were annoyed with me about something. You were rather short with me at the Sale yesterday, you know. I did enjoy that Sale, didn't you? I don't think I'll ever be able to go to St. Stephen's again, though. I shall never see Mr. Riley without picturing him clutching that rag doll."

"Oh, *do* talk of something else," cried Rosemary testily. "To tell you the truth, Gwen, I'm sick to death of hearing about the Sale.

The school has talked of nothing else for weeks. Isn't there ever going to be another subject to discuss ? ”

Gwen squeezed her friend's arm sympathetically. She remembered what Beatrice had said the previous evening, and felt sorry for Rosemary, whose mother still seemed so poorly.

“ Of course there is,” she answered. “ You weren't here before prayers this morning, or you would have heard something else being discussed round the notice-board. The Middle School Rag is going to be read at two o'clock to-morrow, and Rita, who is editor this year, says it's a ripping one.”

“ Oh, good,” Rosemary replied, with real interest. “ It's the first one I've heard, you know. I'm no good at that kind of thing myself, but I shall love listening to it. What is it like ? ”

“ Oh, screamingly funny generally—stories and poems and things. There's a personal column, too. You pay a halfpenny and insert a notice. That's where you get your own back on all your enemies. I haven't contributed to that this year as I'm particularly short of half-pennies, but I've sent in a poem, and Rita says it has been accepted.”

“ Gwen—how ripping ! What's it about ? ”

“ Wait and see, my dear,” her friend answered,

and at that moment the bell put an end to further conversation.

On her way home to dinner that day, Rosemary called in and asked for Reed, only to be told that he had been sent to another town on business and was not expected home till late that night. She left the shop, feeling sick at heart. If only she had never touched the brooch. But it was done now, and all her regrets could not undo it. She had burnt her boats and must abide by what she had done.

CHAPTER XI

THE READING OF "THE RAG"

"Middle School Rag"

"THE reading of the above-mentioned publication will take place in the gymnasium at 2 p.m. to-day. All loyal Middle Schoolites are expected to be present and to put a coin of the realm (not a boot-button) into the collection, which will be in aid of the foolscap used to compile the aforementioned publication.

"(Signed) R. BROWN,
"Hon. Editor."

A crowd of girls stood round this notice, which Rita, not content with the school notice-board, had pinned up in a conspicuous position near the entrance, two days after the Sale. Junior schoolgirls were bemoaning their exclusion from the reading, whilst the Seniors spoke contemptuously of what they called "that feeble production."

By a quarter to two that afternoon the gymnasium was well filled. Several big Juniors who had crept in, hoping that their size would

prevent their being spotted, were ignominiously turned out, and then the editor, Rita Brown, perched herself on the vaulting-horse.

"The first item," she announced, with a somewhat self-conscious air and an utter disregard of grammar, "is by me."

"Hm—would be!" May murmured from the balancing-boom where she was precariously seated.

"Be quiet, Matches! If you don't behave you'll be turned out," said Gwen, giving the boom a shake which nearly brought about May's downfall.

The editor endorsed this remark, and then began reading.

Her story proved to be really thrilling, for Rita had a gift for writing, and knew how to evoke interest. For five minutes the girls listened spellbound to a ghost story which made them feel almost creepy even in broad daylight. It was about a haunted school and three girls who were determined to lay the ghost. The story had just reached its most exciting point—the three girls had, after much daring, reached the haunted room from whence the rattling came—the key had been turned and the door opened—when suddenly Rita stopped reading.

"Go on," Natalia cried eagerly.

"Yes, hurry up. What are you waiting for?"

"Well, there's no more yet," returned the editor.

"No more! What do you mean?"

Rita went rather pink.

"Oh, it's a serial—didn't I tell you?" she asked.

Then the outraged audience protested loudly.

"It can't be a serial," Beatrice announced, "because there won't be another Magazine for perhaps a year."

"But I tell you it *is* a serial," insisted the editor, who was getting more nervous every minute.

"Well then, it isn't going to be," Gwen said decisively. "You're to tell us at once what was in the room, for I couldn't live another day without knowing."

At this, the rest of the Middle School cheered loudly, and stamped their approval.

Rita looked round helplessly. She was one against fifty. Even her dearest friends were waiting with eager eyes for the climax of "the serial." It was a case of sacrificing either her life or her reputation. She quickly decided to forgo the latter.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I'm not quite sure yet," she said hesitatingly. "I was going——"

"Oh—she doesn't know herself. What a *feeble* story. Anyone could write like that."

The storm only lasted for about half a minute, but it seemed an eternity to the disgraced editor, who soon found herself seated on the floor, while another girl took the editorial perch and continued the reading.

"As our friend has shown herself unworthy of the post of editor, I will now continue," said the self-appointed editor. "The next article is a poem by Gwen Forrester."

"A poem isn't an article, silly," said Rita from the floor.

"Be quiet!" was the retort. "The poem, ladies and—er, ladies, that is to say, is entitled:

"REMINISCENCES OF A DROWNING WOMAN ;

OR,

THE LAST REFLECTIONS OF A NOBLE SOUL

By THE NOBLE SOUL "

A howl of delight greeted this announcement. When it had died down the reader continued :

"It was a beauteous summer morn,
The sky had shown a cloudless dawn,
When forty nymphs, in light attire,
Fell in with an adventure dire.

They sallied forth—a beauteous crowd,
Their hearts were soft—their voices loud,
They reached the briny ocean deep,
And waked the lobsters from their sleep.

They splashed about in merry glee,
 Their innocence was sweet to see,
 The few who stayed upon the beach
 Rejoiced at their melodious screech.

Then those who were of net-ball fame
 Decided they would play a game,
 The Genius made a ripping shot,
 The goals she scored were quite a lot.

But all at once a fearful cry
 Escaped the lips of those still dry,
 For Peggy's many-coloured ball
 Had floated far away from all.

Yet all unknown a heroine stood
 Amongst that noisy rowdy brood,
 She heeded neither shrieks nor grins,
 She set her teeth and spread her fins.

Nobly she braved the seething waves
 (Descended from the ancient braves
 Was she, and of right noble birth),
 She was a soul of real, true worth.

Alas, alack ! that heroine brave
 Was threatened with a watery grave:
 'The good must e'en die young,' she thought,
 'This must account for my report.'

The billowy waves closed overhead:
 'It's cold, and salt, and wet,' she said.
 'I wish I'd ne'er attempted this,
 To be on land were perfect bliss.'

There floated through her drowning mind
 A vision of those left behind,
 The sorrow of her dearest friend
 On hearing of her tragic end.

She heard Miss Warren mourn her loss
 And say 'I wish I'd ne'er been cross,
 For though she led me such a dance
 She loved to learn the plains of France.'

So there she mused, that noble one,
 Upon the gracious deeds she'd done.
 But, after all, why make you weep?
 She did not perish in the deep,

But lived to bathe another day,
 And I am very glad to say
 That now she never breaks a rule
 At dear old Rothermere High School."

The applause which concluded this masterpiece was deafening. Gwen tried to look modest and failed miserably, so gave it up and joined in the clapping. It was quite five minutes before order was restored and the reading continued.

"ESSAY ON FAITHFULNESS

By MARGARET SEATON

"Faithfulness is a very good thing to have. It is found in dogs and cats and soldiers, especially in dogs, who often will not leave their masters in distress. Also cats find their way back to their old homes if their feet have been well buttered, and soldiers are faithful to their king and country.

"In Rothermere Churchyard there is a tombstone with the words 'Faithful unto Death' on it.

"Girls should be faithful to their school and come back and visit it after they have left.

"If soldiers are not faithful they are shot, so they have to be careful about it.

" ' Faithful but not Famous ' is the title of a book I read a little while ago. It was very interesting.

" There was a man in ' Pilgrim's Progress ' whose name was Faithful.

" There are many other things I could say about Faithfulness, but my time is up."

" That's a mercy," breathed Natalia softly. " Of all the stodgy essays——"

" You have a distinct gift for writing, Peggy," Gwen interrupted, giving Natalia a sly nudge. " You must let us have some more essays from your gifted pen."

Peggy beamed. " Certainly," she said. " It was rather a deep subject, but I'm glad you liked it."

" It was excellent, and I am longing to get out and put it into practice," Gwen answered. " Now, editor, what is next ? "

" We now come to the personal column, for the use of which every contributor has paid the sum of one halfpenny," was the reply.

The girls settled themselves and prepared to be amused, for this was generally one of the most entertaining pages, because it was so personal.

" I. A lady, known but unnamed, has stolen my geography exercise-book for the purpose of

copying my work and so getting fraudulent honour for herself. If it is not returned within two days the owner of the book will put the matter into the hands of her solicitor.

"M. BRYANT."

May beamed at the reception this announcement received. Natalia was heard to murmur: "Fraudulent honour, indeed. Why, her geography is abominable. I only wanted to copy Miss Warren's corrections—there's nothing else left to copy."

The reader continued:

"2. B. Danvers will give one penny per month and a smile per day to any competent member of the Middle School who will do her algebra prep. for her on Mondays and Thursdays."

"Likely!" sniffed the Genius. "With such magnificent pay I should think the whole school would apply for the post, so I won't offer, in case I am not accepted."

"You should take a sporting chance," Beatrice returned complacently. "Why, whatever's the matter with Rita?" she added, as a commotion arose from the spot where a dozen girls seemed to be trying to sit on the deposed editor.

"She's trying to interrupt the reading," said

one girl, "and she must learn to be quiet. Go on with the Personal Column. What's next?"

"I can hardly read it," was the answer. "Rita's writing is abominable, and this is half scratched out. It's like reading a cypher. Oh yes, I can just make it out, but I don't know what it means. Some Fourth Form joke, I suppose."

"3. Anyone wishing for information regarding the ice-bound land of Siberia should apply to a certain member of the Fourth Form whose name begins with R and ends with N. Instruction also given in the gentle arts of fibbing and stealing. Enclose stamped addressed envelope for reply."

"R and N. Who's that?" demanded the reader, who was a member of the Upper Third. Then, seeing the look of dismay on Gwen's face and catching sight of Rosemary's tense expression, she gasped.

"Oh," she said, "I—I never thought. Rita, you are responsible for this," she added, turning to the editor of the Magazine. "What does it mean? Who sent it in?"

"I don't know," Rita answered sullenly. "I tried to stop you from reading it, but they all sat on me. After I put it in, I decided not to

read it and began scratching it out. It's all your fault for taking my place. You shouldn't be so pushing."

"It isn't her fault, Rita, and you know it isn't. I believe either you or Natalia made it up, and it's just the meanest thing that has ever been put in the Mag. I wish we'd never chosen you for editor," May said, as she fixed a pair of blazing eyes on her schoolfellow.

"I tell you I didn't mean it to be read. I changed my mind," returned Rita desperately. "And I didn't make it up, either. It came in marked 'Personal Column,' and there was a halfpenny stamp, so I don't see how I could help putting it in. There was no name on it and I didn't know the handwriting."

"You could have helped it," Gwen said hotly. "It's wicked to accuse a girl of fibbing and stealing when she has never done either. Come along, Rosemary," she continued. "Matches and I believe in you at all events, and so do heaps of the others."

She went to take Rosemary's arm, but as she did so the girl, who up till then had stood as if rooted to the spot, gave a strangled little sob and, pushing her way through the crowd of girls, opened the door of the gymnasium and disappeared.

CHAPTER XII

ROSEMARY HEARS THE CALL

ROSEMARY did not return to school that term. The shock of the anonymous notice in the "Middle School Rag," added to the strain of the secret that was weighing down her soul, made her really ill, and for a week Mrs. Aston insisted on her staying in bed.

She had, therefore, plenty of time for thought, and some of her meditations were far from pleasant. She wondered, as she lay there, if her theft had really been discovered, and if that was the reason of the announcement in the Personal Column. She felt sure Natalia had put it in. Nobody else would have done such a thing.

Then her thoughts turned to the ten-shilling note that was hidden away in her purse in the pocket of her overcoat. She had got it from Reed on her way home on the afternoon of the Magazine reading. Suppose her mother should find it. How should she account for it?

She was in some ways therefore thoroughly thankful when Mrs. Aston pronounced her well enough to get about again. It was certainly

not easy to risk meeting the girls, but anything was better than lying hour after hour with nothing to think about except her own affairs.

As a matter of fact, she met very few of her school friends, for most of them went away with their families a few days after the school broke. Rosemary and her mother could not, of course, afford to go away, but they went for several excursions and spent whole days on the beach picnicking. At different times the girl would bring home small delicacies to tempt her mother's appetite. Mrs. Aston used sometimes to wonder how she managed to buy them out of her meagre pocket money, and once or twice she remonstrated with her.

"Rosemary, darling," she said one day, when a beautiful peach was placed in front of her, "you should not buy such things. You must have spent all your pocket money on me these last few weeks."

But Rosemary only flushed crimson and looked so obviously embarrassed that her mother said nothing more.

About the middle of September the High School reopened, and before she had been back many days Rosemary came to the conclusion that even if Natalia had found out anything she had not said any more to the school, for the majority of the girls were unusually friendly to

her, feeling, no doubt, that things had gone a bit too far. Even Rita made one or two friendly advances, and seemed thoroughly ashamed of her part in the Magazine affair. Natalia still held aloof, and the two girls never spoke if they could help it.

But although things were easier than she had expected, Rosemary was not happy. Always there seemed to be a dark cloud hovering over her, and a heavy weight inside. She seemed unable to throw it off.

She was sitting at her desk one morning just after break, feeling and looking very miserable, when Gwen came up and put her hand on her shoulder.

"I say, do tell me what's up, Rosemary," she said anxiously. "Are you still upset over that stupid Magazine business? You always look so unhappy now."

"Do I? Sorry! I'll try to look more cheerful in future."

"No, but seriously, old girl, I'm sure you are worrying over something. What is it?"

Rosemary shook herself free from Gwen's hand and laughed a hard little laugh.

"If you really want to know, Gwen, it's just that I'm fed up with life altogether. Sometimes I wish I'd never been born—except for mother," she added wistfully.

Gwen's face took on a more anxious expression. They remained quite silent for a minute, then she said :

"Look here, Rosemary, I'm not a bit good, really, or anything like that, but I . . . I wish you'd come with me to a class I go to on Sundays."

Rosemary looked up in surprise.

"Why, what has that got to do with it?" she asked.

"Well, it's like this," Gwen said, getting rather red. "Sometimes I used to feel as you do—just fed up with everything, though school is ripping and all that. Then one day Matches asked me to go to a Bible Class that a Miss Vernon holds in her drawing-room for us High School girls. I didn't want to go frightfully, but I went, and . . . and . . . oh well, it has just made all the difference, because you see I'm a Christian now, and I don't get fed up like I used to."

Rosemary shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm not keen on that kind of thing," she said. "I don't think I shall like your class, Gwen, though I'd like to go with *you*."

"Then come next Sunday and see how you like it. You needn't come again if you don't want to. See here, I'll call for you if you'll

come, and I know mother would let me ask you back to tea."

Rosemary hesitated. She knew Mrs. Aston would be out to tea on Sunday, and it was not nice being all alone nowadays. There were too many unwelcome thoughts to be faced. At length she said :

"Very well, I'll come this once, but I don't promise ever to come again, mind you."

At about half-past two the following Sunday Gwen and Rosemary made their way together to Miss Vernon's house, which was at the other side of the town, nearer where Gwen lived.

It was a large drawing-room, and about twenty girls had already arrived when Gwen and Rosemary made their appearance. From the moment she set eyes on her, Rosemary liked Miss Vernon. There was a strength and sweetness about her which attracted girls and made them feel that she was a trustworthy friend.

She welcomed the new-comer, and after a few minutes' conversation the girls all seated themselves and began lustily to sing choruses.

Rosemary had never been at such a meeting before. She had all a schoolgirl's fervent horror of anything approaching "pi," but there was none of it here. Everything seemed absolutely natural and happy, and before she had been

there a quarter of an hour, Rosemary felt the depression beginning to slip from her, and she began really to enjoy the meeting.

When it came to the talk, Miss Vernon held up a sheet of paper on which there was a new chorus printed.

“ I want you to learn it and to love it, girls,” she said, “ for it has meant a great deal to me. We will sing it before I talk about it.

“ I heard the Call ‘ Come, follow ’—that was all.
Earth’s joys grew dim, my soul went after Him.
I rose and followed—that was all.
Will you not follow—if you hear His Call ? ”

Sweetly the girls’ voices rang out, for the music was appealing. Then, when they had sung it twice, Miss Vernon began to speak.

She told the girls very simply how some years previously she, like Peter and Andrew of old, had heard the Call of Christ “ Come, follow,” and how she had obeyed it. Then she told how He had cleansed her from sin in His precious Blood, and how as she went after Him earth’s joys had become dim, just as the stars fade before the brilliant glory of the sun. She spoke of His forgiveness and the joy which He had brought into her life, and of all that He had added to it. Then she ended by appealing to any girl who had heard His Call to “ follow.”

The class closed by singing the chorus once

again, but Miss Vernon noticed that, whereas the rest of the girls sang heartily whether they meant it or no, the new member sat quite silent, looking hard at the words, but not singing a note.

Rosemary was glad when the time came for her to go home. She had looked forward to having tea with Gwen, of whom she was really fond, but when it came to the point she was sorry she had not elected to go straight home.

As soon after tea as she could politely escape, Rosemary made her way across the town in the direction of her home. She had refused Gwen's offer to accompany her, for she wanted to be alone, to think.

When she reached the High Street she suddenly changed her mind about going home and began to walk in the direction of the sea. It was getting on for church time by now, and there were very few people on the front when she arrived there.

Rosemary walked down the sandy beach until she almost reached the water's edge, then she flung herself down.

It was very still all around. There was only the tap of the tiny waves, as they broke just in front of her, to break the Sunday quiet of the evening. Ordinarily the girl would have revelled in the sheer beauty of the scene, but to-night

she was almost unconscious of it, for other thoughts were filling her mind.

That afternoon Rosemary had heard the Call. She never remembered having heard it before. Of course, her mother's religion was wonderful, but surely, she had reasoned, it was only for such people as mother. There was no one else like her. Other people she had met had professed the same kind of personal religion, but Rosemary had criticised and decided that their lives fell short of their profession. So, if anything, she had become somewhat antagonistic to such things.

But that day for the first time the Voice of a living Christ had spoken to her soul and called her to follow Him. Her whole being had thrilled with a desire to respond. The story of His love and sacrifice was still fresh in her mind, and the words of the chorus the girls had learnt were throbbing through her soul, as she lay on the beach, gazing at the calm beauty of the sea and sky with eyes which saw nothing, though she felt the peace of it.

Meanwhile, a fierce battle was raging in her soul. She wanted to rise and follow this Saviour. She wanted desperately to know that her sins, which were many, were forgiven her for His sake. But the thought of a small diamond brooch kept her back. Forgiveness involved

confession and restoration of the brooch or money; confession would mean disgrace, and possible expulsion. She could never face it. Besides, it would break her mother's heart to know what she had done.

She thought of what Miss Vernon had said, how that a life of endless possibility and lasting usefulness stretched before the girl who followed in the footsteps of the Man of Galilee. Rosemary knew that such a life could never be hers if she let that moment pass. The Call was so clear, so insistent. It could never be quite the same again.

The sun had buried itself beneath the sea, and dusky shadows were beginning to play on the surface of the water before Rosemary got up. For a few minutes she stood with her eyes fixed on the horizon. Her face was serious, and there was an almost dreamy expression on it, but in her eyes there was a look of peace which had not been there before.

She turned and, for the first time noticing the hour, began to walk quickly home. As she walked, she sang, because she could not help it :

“ I heard the Call ‘ Come, follow ’—that was all.
 Earth's joys grew dim, my soul went after Him,
 I rose and followed—that was all.
 Will you not follow—if you hear His Call ? ”

CHAPTER XIII

ANOTHER NEW GIRL

GRETTA LEHMAN sat in the back row of the Fourth Form at Rothermere feeling that at any moment she might burst into tears. It was Monday morning, and her first day at school.

A week before, her father had brought her over from Switzerland, where she had lived all her life, and after a few days in London had come down to this seaside town and left her as a boarder under Miss Loughton's care.

In vain the girl had stormed and protested. In vain she had threatened alternately to run away or kill herself. The former was impossible, for she had nobody in England to whom she could go. The latter was merely a wild threat at which her father smiled. He was determined that his spoilt little daughter should at least have the benefit of a few years at an English public school.

Gretta spoke English well, but although the Fourth had done their best to draw her into conversation and make her feel at home, she

had not, so far, responded, but had sat in her desk, meeting all their friendly advances with monosyllabic answers.

For Gretta was feeling distinctly aggrieved. It was, as far as she could remember, the first instance in which her will had been crossed and her wishes neglected.

She loved her country and her home. She loved the long, lazy days spent on the mountain slopes, listening to the musical tinkle of the cow bells and the distant thunder of avalanches. Her lessons had consisted of a great deal of desultory reading with the village *padre*, during which time she had managed to pick up an amazing amount of knowledge. The thought of having to work with all these English girls was unbearable.

"I wish to goodness Rosemary was here to jabber to her in her native tongue. Where is she this morning?" whispered Gwen to May, between first and second lessons.

"Don't know," was the answer. "The Genius said she saw her tearing down to school early, about twenty to nine. Perhaps her mother isn't well, and she's come to tell Miss Loughton."

"What a bother—just when she's wanted. Miss Loughton expects us to make this new kid at home, but she doesn't give us a chance. I

don't suppose she can speak much English. However, we'll have another try before Fräulein appears. Do you remember that awful time in the Spring term when Fräulein was late and we shut her out? *What* a blessing Rosemary was then! I do hope her mother isn't bad again."

Gwen banged her desk down, and turned round to the new girl.

"Has . . . your . . . father . . . gone . . . back . . . to . . . Switzerland?" she asked slowly, and with much emphasis on every word.

"No," was the answer.

"Is . . . he . . . coming . . . back . . . here?" Still with much emphasis.

"Yes."

This was disconcerting. The girl evidently understood, but was shy. She must be drawn out.

"When . . . is . . . he . . . coming . . . back?"

"Friday."

"Really—can't . . . you write . . . and ask . . . him . . . to make . . . it a . . . day . . . sooner . . . then . . . he'll . . . be . . . in . . . time for the . . . school concert."

Gwen was getting rather breathless. It was hard work "drawing out" this Swiss girl. Her last remark called for no answer at all, so she tried again.

"We . . . give . . . a . . . concert . . . every . . . year. Parents . . . fathers and mothers that is . . . come. Do . . . you . . . play?"

"Yes."

"The piano?" (This was accompanied by a kind of dumb charade in case the foreigner did not know of such an instrument.)

"No."

"What . . . do . . . you . . . play?"

"The violin."

By this time Gwen was thoroughly discouraged. She nudged May.

"You go on, Matches," she whispered. "I wish Fräulein would hurry up."

May made a valiant attempt, but failed miserably. At last, to her great relief, the conversation became general. The girls left the new-comer to herself and prepared to enjoy themselves until such time as Fräulein should appear.

Meanwhile, Rosemary had spent the whole of the first lesson with the head mistress in her study. She never even told her mother what was said during that time, but from that day a friendship was established between the two which outlasted Rosemary's school life. For in spite of a necessarily stern exterior, Miss Loughton had a wonderfully discerning heart, and as she heard the sad story she had a sudden

and very vivid glimpse of the motive behind the sin.

She did not hesitate to call it sin, and in after years Rosemary was thankful for that. She showed her pupil clearly the exceeding sinfulness of sin in God's sight, and spoke of what it had cost God to cancel it. It was then that Rosemary, in faltering words, told of how she had found that out the previous evening on the seashore.

When the bell went, Miss Loughton called Fräulein and left the two together in her study. It was harder telling Fräulein—almost as hard as it had been to tell her mother the night before—for Fräulein was the one whom she had wronged.

At first the little German found it quite impossible to take in Rosemary's rather incoherent words. When she had grasped the meaning of them, she said :

“ You haf taken mein leetle brooch ? ”

“ Yes, Fräulein, I stole it.”

Fräulein's face softened suddenly.

“ My poor child. But you haf suffered, I see. I notice your face in class.”

Rosemary's eyes filled with tears. Her control was giving way under this kindness. Fräulein, however, misinterpreted it, and felt she was being too hard.

“I mind no more about ze brooch,” she added hastily, “for,” and her face went pink, “ze one who give me ze brooch haf give me anuzzer, what you call trinket. I begin to wear it soon, for Karl and I will be married soon—ver soon.”

It was a masterly stroke, and was the outcome of a warm, generous heart, for the knowledge that she was the first girl in the school to whom the news had been entrusted seemed somehow to give Rosemary back her self-respect. As she made her way to the form-room after her interview with Fräulein, she felt happier than she had done since the day of the Orphanage Sale, even though the greatest ordeal still lay before her.

For Rosemary had fully made up her mind to tell her form about the brooch. The school she felt she could not face—she lacked the physical power to do it—but the girls must know, and they must know what had brought her to confess her sin.

It was a quarter of an hour after the scheduled time for the German lesson that the girls were astonished to see Fräulein and Rosemary enter together. Fräulein was very red, and Rosemary very white. Fräulein spoke first—quickly and nervously.

“Rosemary haf something she wish to say

to you," she said. "You will all listen, and when you haf listened you will forgive, for what is it ze Bible say, 'Be ye kind one to another—tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake haf forgiven you.'"

The girls looked at her in amazement. Only May Bryant, with a sudden intuition, felt her heart sink.

"I want to tell you all," said Rosemary quietly, "that it was I who took Fräulein's brooch. I picked it up on the day of the Sale. Of course, I didn't know it was hers, but it was just as wicked. I didn't realise quite how wicked it was till last night, when I gave myself to God, and I knew if I was to be a Christian I must get this off my conscience."

It seemed to Rosemary afterwards that she only saw Gwen as she spoke. For it was Gwen's eyes that held her and helped her, and it was Gwen who, the minute she stopped speaking, sprang to her side in front of the form.

"And I want to tell you that I'm a Christian, too," she said. "And so is Matches, and we're just as bad as Rosemary, for we've all done wrong things, only ours haven't seemed so bad, though they were really."

Suddenly Natalia jumped up.

"Be careful what you say, Gwen," she cried angrily. "We're not all thieves, and I, for one,

am jolly glad that everything is out. It's all very well for Rosemary to cant about being a Christian. We'll believe that when we see it, but I would be glad if you'll stop classing her with me. It's a case of like father like daughter."

She sat down amidst a dead silence. Fräulein only sighed gently. She could not understand these girls when they spoke quickly, but she felt something was wrong.

It was Rosemary who broke the silence.

"You are right about me, Natalia," she said huskily, "but you are not right about father—I'm convinced of it, and I can't bear to have you speak of him like that. Your uncle was wrong about it. Mother says he was brave and true, and I know he was."

Natalia made no reply. She was almost too angry to speak. How dare Gwen compare her with Rosemary! How she hated her—this girl who had so nearly taken her coveted place in the First, and how she rejoiced in her downfall!

There was not a scrap of work done for the rest of that morning. Lessons dragged heavily on, but they were a mere farce. By the end of break every girl in Rothermere High School knew that Rosemary had stolen Fräulein's brooch. Some looked at her curiously, some were specially kind—others passed her by with marked aloofness.

But from the moment Rosemary entered the form-room until she went home to lunch, Gretta Lehman never took her eyes off her. "Rosemary Aston." Somewhere in the dim recesses of her memory she knew that name, and surely Rosemary's face was familiar. But what was it that Natalia had said about Mr. Aston being a thief? It was all very strange, and rather exciting. For the first time since her arrival in England Gretta forgot to be miserable, for she thought she scented a mystery to which she had the clue. She would lay low till her father returned on Friday. Then she would see.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SCHOOL CONCERT

IT was Thursday evening at the High School, and the Hall was packed with parents and friends. Girls in white frocks flitted about or stood talking to their relatives. Every now and then a peal of happy laughter rang through the hall from one or other of the different groups.

The hall itself had been completely transformed, for the Fifth and Sixth Forms had spent the afternoon decorating. Trails of greenery festooned the window ledges and hung from the electric lights. The gallery was similarly decorated, and the platform had been draped with the school colours.

In one of the form-rooms to the side of the platform different girls sat anxiously conning their pieces. It was a great honour at Rothermere to be asked to give any kind of a solo item. Gwen, with her wonderful power of mimicry, was also an excellent reciter, and this evening she sat with "Julius Cæsar" propped up in front of her, her fingers in her ears to shut

out the babblings of other reciters, repeating in a low-pitched voice :

“ Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears,
I come to bury Cæsar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them,
The good is oft interred with their bones. . . .”

“ How are you feeling ? ” asked Rosemary, coming into the “ artistes ’ ” room at this moment.

“ As if I were immortalising my own funeral, instead of Cæsar’s,” Gwen answered, with a groan. “ I was so bucked at being chosen to recite, but now I’d give anything to get out of it.”

“ Paying the price of genius,” laughed Rosemary. “ Well, it’s going to begin soon, so I’d advise you to shut up that book and come into the hall.”

It was only four days since that Sunday night when Rosemary had heard the Call and followed, but already she looked a different girl. All the dull listlessness that had marked her manner since the Orphanage Sale had gone. It seemed as though a dark cloud had been lifted from her face.

Yet these four days had not been easy ones. At her request Miss Loughton had told the whole school the story of the missing brooch, and although Rosemary could have borne all the remarks about herself, there were times

when, but for God's help, she felt she could not have borne the thinly veiled hints and innuendos about her father. Natalia soon realised this and made full use of it, and every evening Rosemary had gone home with a sore heart.

Often during those days she had been tempted to tell Mrs. Aston all about it, but her fear of hurting her mother by such memories always kept her from it, and Mrs. Aston had no idea that any girl at school knew about the past.

Rosemary had found it hard work to persuade her mother to come to the school concert. She felt sure that it was bad for her to be indoors so much, for she rarely went out, except for necessary shopping. So it was with quite an air of victory that she piloted her mother through the crowd of people to a seat next to Mrs. Forrester, which the latter had asked Gwen to reserve in case Mrs. Aston decided to come at the last moment. The two ladies were soon deep in conversation, and so Rosemary slipped off to find her beloved Gwen.

At seven o'clock the curtains were drawn, and showed the whole of the Upper School crammed on to the platform, which had been enlarged for the occasion. The Juniors, very happy and excited, formed a white block in the gallery.

The pianist struck a chord, and many a parent was taken back to his own school days, and one or two Harrow boys in the audience stood to attention as the Harrow School song, adapted for the Rothermere High School girls, rang out from a hundred and fifty eager throats :

“ Forty years on, when afar and asunder
Parted are those who are singing to-day.
When you look back and forgetfully wonder
What you were like in your work and your play.
Then it may be there will often come o'er you
Glimpses of notes like the catch of a song.
Visions of girlhood shall float then before you,
Echoes of dreamland shall bear them along.

“ Follow up ! follow up ! follow up ! follow up ! follow
up !
Whether winning or losing the game,
Do your best for the team just the same.
Fo low up ! follow up !

“ Routs and discomfitures, rushes and rallies,
Scoring well tried for and thwarted or won,
Strife without anger, and art without malice,
How will it seem to you forty years on ?
' Then,' you will say, ' not a feverish minute
Strained the weak heart, or the wavering knee,
Never the battle raged hottest but in it,
Neither the last nor the faintest were we.'

“ Oh the great days, in the distance enchanted,
Days of fresh air in the rain and the sun,
How we rejoiced as we struggled and panted,
Hardly believable forty years on.
How we rejoiced in them one with another,
Auguring triumph, or balancing fate.
Loved the ally with the heart of a brother,
Hated the foe with a playing at hate.

“Forty years on, growing older and older,
Shorter in breath as in memory long,
Feeble of foot and rheumatic of shoulder,
What will it help you that once you were strong?
God give us goals to defend or beleaguer,
Games to play out, whether earnest or fun.
Fights for the fearless and goals for the eager,
Twenty and thirty and forty years on.”

Rosemary's eyes glowed as she sang, and she realised for the first time how intensely proud she was of her school, and how thankful that Miss Loughton had not sent her away in disgrace. Gwen told her afterwards that she and Matches always had a prickly feeling in their spines when they heard the school song or the National Anthem.

When the girls had filed off the platform and arranged themselves in the gallery, the curtains were again withdrawn, and revealed eight white, motionless figures in various attitudes of sitting and standing.

“The Greek Play,” murmured Peggy Seaton, in a hushed tone. “Do you think we shall be togged up like that when we get into the Sixth? Our beloved Head Girl looks for all the world like Tutankhamen.”

An indignant glance from one of the Head Girl's adorers silenced Peggy, but only for a moment.

“What *have* they got on?” she whispered to the Genius.

“Sheets, of course, silly. I believe I can see the laundry mark on one of them.”

A suppressed titter greeted this remark. One of the staff looked up from the body of the hall and held up a warning finger.

The play progressed somewhat tediously for the majority of the audience, who did not understand a word of it. The school was frankly relieved when it ended, though the girls clapped vigorously.

After that came part songs from the school choir, and various dialogues and recitations, during which time Gwen acquitted herself most creditably, and evoked a storm of applause which, to be strictly accurate, was not on account of her reciting, but of her popular self.

To the Fourth Form the chief and all-important event of the evening was the production, by themselves, of a scene from “Wilhelm Tell.” To do them justice, they had, for the sake of the reputation of their form, put a considerable amount of work into this, and Fräulein had mentally decided to give the new German mistress who was to follow her, the hint. If she could get up something similar each term, it might induce the girls to work at their German.

The Genius, as being the steadiest girl in the form, had been chosen for the son and Rose-

mary, on account of her fluent German, was Wilhelm Tell. Peggy, Rita, Beatrice and Natalia were all in it. Matches did not shine at German, so had been elected stage manager. Gwen was a "forester," much to her amusement.

The first part of the scene went off with great success, for the acting was so good that, in spite of the foreign tongue, everyone thoroughly enjoyed it. Wilhelm had, with great dramatic effect, refused to salute the hat hung upon a pole in the middle of the stage; the decree that he must, as a penalty, shoot the apple from his boy's head, had been announced; Gwen, with great solemnity, was preparing to place the apple on the unresisting head of the Genius, when a most unforeseen catastrophe occurred.

The Genius had a fit of giggling.

It was, as she afterwards explained, internal. Beyond a few convulsive grimaces it did not express itself on her face, but it shook her from head to foot, so much so that the apple refused to stay upon her head.

The first time Gwen caught it. The second time it dropped at her feet. A third time she tried, and this time it seemed successful, though unsteady. She retreated, somewhat apprehensively, but had barely reached her place at

the back of the stage when fresh convulsions seized the unfortunate victim, and this time the apple, with nobody to catch it, bounced once more to the floor, and rolled gently but very determinedly off the edge of the platform and down into the hall.

A howl of delight came from the girls in the gallery ; the audience shook with laughter, and the unfortunate actresses glared at their school friend. Dorothy could never satisfactorily explain why it all happened. All she could say was that it suddenly struck her as being extremely funny to be standing there with an apple on her head, waiting to be shot at.

How they managed to get through the rest of the play the girls never knew. Rosemary, with great presence of mind, proceeded to shoot at nothing, and though the girls were furious beyond words with the Genius, the clapping which followed them, as they made their way back to the dressing-room, partly compensated. At any rate, as one of them remarked consolingly, their item would be remembered when everything else was forgotten.

After that, things progressed along more ordinary lines. The only other member of the Fourth who was performing was Gretta, who was rumoured to be a wonderful violinist.

Strangely enough, Rosemary had hardly noticed her presence in the form that week. Other thoughts had been so uppermost in her mind that beyond a few casual enquiries she had shown no interest in the Swiss girl, and Gretta had purposely avoided mixing with the girls. She always went off by herself at break, and the girls had got tired of trying to be friendly.

She was greeted with but little applause when she appeared on the platform with her violin under her arm, but this did not seem to disconcert her in the slightest. She tuned her fiddle, and then, putting it to her chin, lifted her bow, and began to play.

From the moment her bow touched the strings an extraordinary hush settled over the audience. Not even a Junior fidgeted. Rosemary, in the gallery, felt almost as if she were in a trance, for as the Swiss girl played she was back amongst the pine-clad slopes of the Oberland—and Rosemary was with her.

She could hear the wind as it sobbed and wailed through the tree-tops when the sky was black and stormy. She saw the thunder clouds hanging, with a weird, unearthly light, over the mountain tops. She heard them break and roll from peak to peak, then shudder away into silence.

Then suddenly the sky was clear and blue. Little fleecy clouds moved lazily along, hiding the snow-peaks for a minute, only to reveal them again, more bright than before. Fields of brilliant Alpine flowers lay at her feet. The sweet scent of the narcissus was wafted up to her. The sun shone, and the cowbells tinkled.

Gretta had stopped playing, and had almost left the platform before a sound came from the audience. Then it broke—a thunder of applause such as no girl had ever received at Rothermere. Rosemary looked down to where her mother was sitting—she knew how she would love it. As she looked, she saw to her consternation that Mrs. Aston had risen from her seat and, with a face which looked deathly in its whiteness, was making her way quickly out of the hall.

With a sudden fear lest her mother should be ill, Rosemary jumped to her feet and, pushing her way through the crowd of girls, who were still applauding too vigorously to notice her, reached the gallery door and tore down the steps to the landing. Mrs. Aston was sitting there with Miss Warren.

“Go and get your mother a glass of water, dear,” she said, as Rosemary appeared. “The heat was evidently too much for her.”

When the water was fetched the mistress

left the girl with her mother, telling her that she would telephone for a cab. No sooner had Miss Warren disappeared than Mrs. Aston turned to her daughter.

"That girl who has just played, dear. Who is she?" she asked.

"Why, I've never even told you about her, darling. She's a Swiss girl—a boarder—only come to school this week. Doesn't she play gloriously?"

"A Swiss girl. What did you say her name is?"

"Gretta something—Gretta—yes, I remember—Lehman. Oh, Mother—Mother mine—what is it? I never thought——"

Rosemary dropped on her knees by her mother's chair, and buried her face in her lap. For suddenly, with one of those strange flashes of recollection, she remembered. Of course, she had seen Gretta before—only once, certainly, for she had lived away with relatives in another part of Switzerland, but Rosemary remembered clearly now the day that her father's Swiss business friend had brought his little girl over to Lucerne to visit the Astons. That girl had been Gretta.

They did not speak of it on the way home, but late into the night Mrs. Aston sat telling Rosemary the whole story. The other girls

had been in bed and asleep for hours when at length they went to their bedrooms. And all through the short night, Rosemary lay on her bed with wide-open eyes, looking out into the starlit night, and wondering.

CHAPTER XV

THE MYSTERY SOLVED

“ I AM coming up to school to see Miss Loughton some time to-day, Rosemary,” said Mrs. Aston, as the two sat together over breakfast the next morning. “ If it be true that Herr Lehman is still living I must get into touch with him. He is the only one who can give me any news of your father at the end.”

“ But, mother dear, if it is really Gretta’s own father of whom she speaks, and not a foster father, as we fear, wouldn’t he have let you know that he was alive? He must have known how anxious you would be to hear about father.”

“ It would have been almost impossible to trace us, Rosemary,” her mother answered. “ There were such false reports spread about your dear father at the time, that I felt it better for your sake just to disappear. We did not leave our address or any clue behind us. I wanted to cut off with the past in order that it might not hinder you. Miss Loughton is the

only person to whom the story has been mentioned since we came to England, and that was only because she knew. We were old school friends."

"As a matter of fact, all the girls at school know, Mother mine. It doesn't matter telling you now, but Natalia Foreman found out from an uncle of hers who lives in Switzerland. Some of the girls have been horrid about it, and she has been the worst."

"My poor child. I had no idea that this was going on. You should have told me. Who is Natalia's uncle? I wonder if we knew him."

"No, I don't think so, darling, for he only went back to Switzerland a year ago. He was living with Natalia and her parents in England before that, and she is going out to live with him soon. I don't know his name. Natalia just calls him Uncle Dick."

"How strange," said Mrs. Aston, softly to herself.

"What is strange, mother?"

"Oh—nothing, really. Only the name of Dick brings back old memories. It is a very common one, to be sure, but your father's partner—the one I told you last night I never trusted—was named Richard Levermore, and your father always called him Dick. He did a great deal for him, too, and befriended him

in many ways, but I always felt his trust was misplaced. Still," she added, "if Herr Lehman is really alive, which I can hardly believe, it is just possible that he may be able to throw some light which may clear our name. Now, dear, you must run, or you will be late for school. You won't, of course, say a word about this to any of the girls."

Rosemary arrived at school to find the Fourth in a state of great excitement over Gretta's performance of the previous evening. It appeared that a famous violinist had been present, who had afterwards seen the girl and said that he would like to meet her father and have a talk with him about her future. From being an obscure and unattractive member of the form, Gretta had leapt to sudden popularity.

She took it all very calmly, for she was really too much of a genius to care particularly about applause, although she was human enough to appreciate it. She was utterly happy when playing, and her greatest desire had always been to spend her life with her music.

Rosemary took the earliest opportunity she could of studying the Swiss girl carefully. Yes! she was absolutely sure now that she had seen that face before—how stupid of her not to have noticed the likeness. Rosemary sat through the first two lessons feeling that she was on the

verge of a discovery. If Herr Lehman were really alive, what might he not be able to tell them?

At twelve o'clock the form packed away its geography books and prepared to march down to the gymnasium. It was always a debatable question as to whether Friday was a "nice" day that particular term, for although there was the detested geography to be faced, it was followed by gym., the anticipation of which, as Peggy said, made life just bearable.

In order to reach the gymnasium the girls had to pass down what was known as "The Head's Corridor." There was hardly any need for a silence rule in that passage, for voices were instinctively hushed and almost an unearthly silence invariably prevailed as they passed Miss Loughton's door.

As the form passed out of the hall into the corridor on this particular morning, Rosemary just wondered if by any chance her mother should be in the waiting-room, which was exactly opposite Miss Loughton's study. She decided that if the door was open she would peep in. It was quite likely that Mrs. Aston would time her visit so that she and Rosemary could go home together to lunch.

To her great delight, as they turned into the corridor she saw her mother following a maid

towards the door of the waiting-room. She waved wildly, and Mrs. Aston, glancing in her direction, smiled back.

The maid opened the door of the waiting-room and stood aside for the visitor to enter. Mrs. Aston, however, paused for a moment and, turning her head, scanned the faces of the approaching files of girls. She wanted to see Gretta once more, for she had seen her at a distance the previous evening, though there was not a doubt in her mind as to who the girl was. She had recognised her likeness to her father immediately, and the name confirmed it without doubt.

As she hesitated, the door of the Head's study opened, and Miss Loughton came out, followed by a tall, grey-haired gentleman.

"I would like you to meet Signor Valeri," she was saying; "he thinks that there is no doubt of Gretta's success if she is given first-class teaching, but it would undoubtedly be more satisfactory if . . ."

Then she stopped suddenly. Gretta, with a cry of joy, had broken from her place amongst the crowd of girls, who had halted when their head mistress appeared, and was clinging to her father's arm in ecstasy. But Herr Lehman was not looking at her. His eyes were fixed on Mrs. Aston, who stood opposite him, absolutely calm

and self-possessed, but with every vestige of colour gone from her face.

It was Miss Loughton who broke the silence.

“ You and Mrs. Aston have met before ? ” she enquired.

Still no answer came from either of them. Gretta, however, looked up eagerly into her father’s face.

“ I knew, my father,” she said in English, “ I knew all along that you would know Rosemary. Look, here she is,” pulling her away from May Bryant, who had taken her arm. “ She is the daughter of the friend you speak of sometimes—the Paul you say who was drowned when you nearly were.”

A gasp of astonishment came from the seventeen waiting girls. Miss Loughton, who was listening eagerly, seemed to have forgotten their presence.

Herr Lehman put his hand on Rosemary’s shoulder, and the girl felt him looking deep down into her eyes. Then he took her arm and led her across the corridor to where her mother still stood.

“ My friend,” he said to Mrs. Aston, “ I have searched for you almost unceasingly for over a year. I have advertised in every Swiss paper, and a few English ones. And now I find you—here.”

There was a pause. Then Rosemary's mother spoke, and her voice sounded far away and unreal.

"We mourned you as dead," she said. "There seemed no hope—in a small boat—in that fearful storm. What does it all mean? How is it that you are still alive?"

There was a breathless silence in the corridor as Herr Lehman answered:

"We—Paul Aston and I—were in one of the loneliest arms of the lake when the storm came. There was not a chalet to be seen—not a sign of life. We had of purpose gone there, for we had grave things to discuss. That day my friend had discovered that his English partner, Dick Levermore, had gambled away something like ten thousand pounds of the firm's money. Personally, I never trusted him, but your husband left him in sole charge of the finance. Of course, he was a rogue."

He stopped for a moment. Mrs. Aston's eyes were flashing. "I knew it," she murmured. "I always knew he was not to be trusted."

"You were right," the Swiss continued, "but Paul was always on the side of trusting a man, and even that night he never said a bitter word against Dick Levermore, but seemed more concerned about his sin. He was broken-hearted at the thought of your future and what would happen to his little girl."

“Then we were wrecked, and of that I remember nothing. They tell me that I must have crashed my head against something, for the next thing I recollect was being tended by a mountaineer and his wife. I knew nothing of what had happened. For three months my memory had gone, and the mountain folk with whom I was staying knew nothing of the outside world, simple folk that they were. They hardly saw a soul from one year’s end to another, and it did not occur to them that they should try to find out who I was. They were content to keep me in my weakness. May the good God requite them for their kindness!

“After three months my memory returned—I know not how. I found my Gretta, rewarded my kind friends with the little that I could, and started business again on the other side of Switzerland. Since then I have grown rich and have spared nothing to find you—but without success until to-day. But I have also this last week tracked the man I have sought almost day and night to clear your husband’s name. For five years Dick Levermore lived in this town with his sister and brother-in-law, who left him guardian of their daughter, I hear. He has gone back to Switzerland a year ago, and in a short time I follow him and expose him.”

Herr Lehman's eyes blazed as he made this statement, but nobody noticed it. For as the last sentence escaped his lips the eyes of all the girls were turned in wondering astonishment on Natalia.

She stood quite still, her face white and tense. For the space of a minute not a word was spoken. This, then, was the explanation of the mystery concerning Rosemary's father, and Natalia's uncle was the real culprit. It was surely the most exciting page in the history of the school.

Miss Loughton, conscious of the electric atmosphere, turned to the girls, intending to dismiss them. But before she could utter a word, Natalia had broken through, and stood before Rosemary.

"It's all untrue—every bit," she cried passionately, "and I hate you—hate you—*hate* you."

Then she turned, and darted down the corridor and out at the front entrance.

CHAPTER XVI

BACK TO THE MOUNTAINS

IT was a hot, lazy day in July, and the Channel between Newhaven and Dieppe looked like a mill-pond. Every now and then a porpoise would turn a graceful somersault just above the surface of the water, only to return to its native sphere, and leave the glassy sea as unruffled as ever.

The Channel steamer made its way smoothly along, so smoothly that the passengers on deck hardly realised that there was any movement at all. They were mostly stretched out on deck-chairs, half-asleep, but at the stern sat a group of girls whose excitement was far too great to allow of rest.

“What I can’t help regretting,” Gwen Forrester was saying, “are those pills I took to prevent sea-sickness. And I hardly ate any lunch, so as to prepare for the worst. It seems such a waste.”

“Exactly,” May Bryant agreed. “I feel almost as if I were being done out of something by not being sea-sick. Of course, it must be horrid at the time, but just *think* of being able

to swank about it to the girls when we get back."

Rosemary, who was sitting next to her mother, laughed and turned to Gretta.

"Can't you hear them saying it next term?" she asked. "They would be so blasé about it. 'The last time I crossed the Channel I was *horribly* sea-sick, weren't you?' The girls would be green with envy."

It was eighteen months since the day when Herr Lehman had met Mrs. Aston in the Head's corridor. The Fourth Form had become the Fifth now, and in view of the fact that they would be Prefects next year, they were beginning to steady down somewhat, though they had lost none of their original spirits.

With the exception of one girl, all the members of the old Fourth were still at school. Natalia Foreman had never returned since that memorable day, Rosemary had written to her, and several times called, but Natalia had neither answered her letter nor consented to see her. It was rumoured, and later confirmed in the school, that she had gone to join her uncle in Switzerland. The one cloud on Rosemary's happiness was the fact that, as far as she knew, Natalia still hated her and felt she was responsible for Herr Lehman's discovery. But she prayed on, and had faith that one day the breach would be healed.

Rosemary herself was now one of the most popular girls in the school. Six months previously she had won her first team net-ball badge, and had already distinguished herself in the Ringwood Match. And now that she was no longer under a cloud of worry and suspicion, her work had improved, and she was being spoken of as the likely winner of the yearly University Scholarship from Rothermere. The Genius, her only rival, was going out to India with her parents directly she left school. She had announced her intention of spending her life instructing young natives in mathematics, and Beatrice, whose parents were also in India, promised to supply wet bandages for their heads.

It had been an exciting moment when, soon after Christmas, Herr Lehman had written from Lucerne, inviting Mrs. Aston and Rosemary to come out with Gretta and join him for the summer holidays. And when he added that the two girls might each choose a friend to share their pleasure, their excitement knew no bounds.

Rosemary, of course, did not think twice about who should be her choice, and the whole plan seemed perfect when Gretta decided on Matches. From that moment until the day the school broke up, the envious Fifth heard nothing but rapturous anticipations of the forthcoming treat.

It was the first time either Gwen or Matches

had been abroad, so they were full of wonder at everything. Even the journey from Victoria to Newhaven had seemed different from ordinary journeys to the coast.

To Gretta it meant going home for the first time in eighteen months. She was glad now of her father's decision to send her to England, for under Signor Valeri's tuition her playing had improved wonderfully, and her master was predicting a future for her, but time and again she had longed for the heights and depths and spaces of her native land. Her heart beat quickly at the thought of seeing her beloved mountains again.

Rosemary, too, felt the thrill of home-going upon her, but Mrs. Aston's joy was mingled with pain, for whilst Switzerland was the place of her happiest memories, it was also the place of her saddest. However, she did not let this be seen, for it might have cast a shadow on the girls' enjoyment, so altogether it was a riotously merry little party that sat by the stern on that hot July day.

In due time the French coast was sighted, long and low and misty against the horizon, and after that it was not long before they drew up in Dieppe Harbour, were bundled through Customs by noisy, gesticulating porters who looked just as if they had walked out of the French picture sheet at school, and found

themselves in the small Continental train which was to take them through to Paris.

"I really feel as if another ounce of excitement would make me burst," Gwen confided to Matches, as they leaned out of the corridor window and bought a bunch of roses from one of the little French children who ran along the line offering their wares.

"So do I," said her friend, "but we must cram it down somehow, for Rosemary says there's heaps more to come. Oh, isn't Herr Lehman an angel to give us this treat? It quite repays us for our frantic efforts to make Gretta feel at home that first morning she came. Do you remember?"

"Don't I just," answered Gwen, with a grimace. "I thought she couldn't understand English, too. What a donkey she must have thought me." And with a laugh at the recollection the two girls went back into the carriage, and gaily presented Mrs. Aston with the roses they had bought.

The run through Normandy was perfect, and the girls exclaimed afresh at each picturesque little village they passed. All the buildings looked so white and dazzling, and the sun slanting through the trees made a continual feast of beauty for them to gaze upon.

They reached Paris about six o'clock. There was only time for a brief look at the Eiffel

Tower, which Rosemary declared made her ache for a glass of lemonade, and then they had dinner in a funny little café which Mrs. Aston knew, and boarded the train for their long night journey to Basel.

The girls were far too excited to sleep much, so it was a tired party that tumbled out of the train at Basel early the next morning. However, breakfast of coffee and rolls and delicious thick honey at the station restaurant revived them, and they were soon clamouring to be taken down "just to stand by the Rhine for a minute."

"It will be such ripping fun to be able to tell the girls that we've sung 'Die Lorelei' actually over the waters of the Rhine," said Matches gleefully, as they walked down to the river.

"I wish I had an apple and a bow and arrow—then we could do 'Wilhelm Tell,' and send the apple into the Rhine," said Gwen reflectively.

The others laughed at the remembrance of the fated apple which would not stay on Dorothy Carson's head, but Mrs. Aston assured Gwen that the authorities might object to such a performance.

After all, Matches was not able to charm the passers-by with the strains of "Die Lorelei," for when they reached the river Mrs. Aston discovered that there was not too much time

before their train left, so they only just glanced at the historic waters, and then hurriedly retraced their steps to the station.

As the train grated into the little mountain station which was their destination, the girls had almost to hold Gretta down, for in her frantic desire to get the first glimpse of her father she looked like throwing herself out of the window. He was there—waiting for them, and having freed himself from Gretta's embraces, he welcomed his visitors, and escorted them up to the hotel where they were to stay.

The weeks that followed were blissful beyond description to the four happy schoolgirls. They climbed, for at that time of the year all the passes and peaks were open to them; they went for whole day excursions to other villages, and Gwen and Matches freely aired their German, to the great amusement of the natives. And when it was too hot to do anything else, they lay for hours beside a mountain stream, gazing up at the vivid blue sky and the eternal snows outlined against it.

Towards the end of August they left their Alpine retreat and went down into Lucerne for the last two weeks.

To Mrs. Aston and Rosemary it was a place of haunting memories, but they were glad to be there, chiefly because of a certain grave in a little burying-place just outside the town.

Rosemary had never even seen it, for she had been too young to attend her father's funeral. She and Mrs. Aston both guessed whose kind thought had ordered that it should be cared for and kept, and at whose expense the plain white stone had been erected with the inscription :

PAUL ASTON

DROWNED DURING A STORM IN LAKE LUZERN

" We give thanks to God always for you."

They wondered if it was the same good friend who placed the bunch of pure white flowers upon it so regularly, for each day they were there, besides the ones that Rosemary and her mother took.

When he disclaimed all knowledge of the flowers, they came to the conclusion that it must be a Sister of Mercy, who had taken pity on Mr. Aston's soul, and was praying for him. And although Rosemary knew there was no need for that, she liked to think that there would be flowers on her father's grave even when she could not put them there herself.

And although there were generally tears in Mrs. Aston's eyes when she left that quiet resting-place, they were not altogether tears of sorrow, for there was happiness mixed with them, at the thought that after all these years her husband's name had been cleared and his honour established.

The evening before the party was due to return to England, Rosemary escaped from the hotel directly dinner was finished, and went down to the lake-side. She wanted to be alone, to think for a bit and to take her last look at the sun-tipped mountains.

Her thoughts were busy as she sat there. She went over the details of the glorious holiday which was just ending. How perfect it had all been, and yet . . . yet . . . there was the shadow of disappointment in Rosemary's heart as she thought of it. For although she had said nothing to anyone, in her secret heart she had somehow hoped and expected to meet Natalia during those weeks, and learn that the old enmity was gone and that they could be friends.

Of course, it was ridiculous to expect it, she argued to herself. For all she knew, her old schoolfellow might be living on the other side of Switzerland. Still—it was disappointing.

As the evening shadows began to play round the mountain tops, she got up and made her way towards the little cemetery. She must take a last farewell of that spot, for it would be long before she could come back to it.

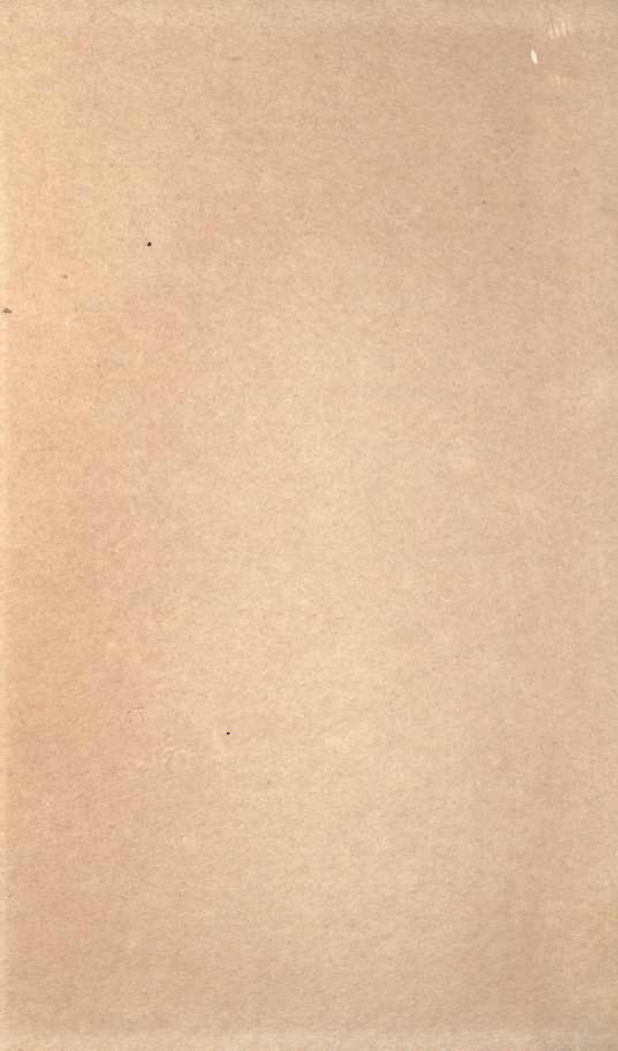
It was almost dusk by the time she reached it, but Rosemary was not afraid. She opened the small wooden gate and walked along the grass paths towards the clump of trees which

marked her father's grave. Within fifty yards of it she stopped suddenly. A figure was kneeling by the stone, carefully arranging a bunch of white flowers in a vase. This, evidently, was the unknown donor of the flowers, and she was not a nun, but a young girl.

Rosemary went a few steps nearer, intent on seeing her face, for the gathering gloom almost hid it. As she approached, the figure got up, stood for a minute looking at the stone, then, without a glance in Rosemary's direction, walked quickly away.

When she had disappeared, the girl who was watching her dropped to her knees. Her eyes were blinded with tears, but in her heart there was a great joy. For in that minute she had seen the face of the girl who brought the flowers.

It was Natalia !



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